

Nicholas Morieson

Deakin University Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Australia

ORCID: 0000-0001-5633-6388

*“Hungary is the place to be right now”:
Hungarian post-liberalism and its influence
on American conservatives*

Abstract: This paper examines emerging post-liberalism on the American political right, and its relationship with the Hungarian post-liberalism associated with Viktor Orbán and his ruling Fidesz party. The electoral success enjoyed by Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and his transformation of Hungary into a post-liberal ‘Christian democracy’, has inspired interest in Hungary among many social conservatives in the United States. For Americans who belong to the post-liberal right, Orbán’s government is a ‘model’ insofar as they believe the Hungarian Prime minister has done what American right could not do: prevent liberals and progressives from ‘capturing’ state institutions and major corporations.

American post-liberals’ interest in Orbán has led to several visiting him, and the decision to hold the CPAC conference in Budapest in 2022. This paper examines why so many Americans conservatives have come to admire Orbán’s ‘post-liberal’ regime in Hungary, what they have learned from Orbán, and investigates whether American conservative activists and politicians are now putting Orbán style illiberalism into practice in American politics.

The paper thus first examines the writings of post-liberal, pro-Orbán, American conservative journalists, intellectuals, and activists, and explores the reasons behind their antipathy to liberalism, admiration of Orbán, and desire to bring to America Orbán style post-liberal government. Second, to determine whether Orbán style post-liberalism is now being practiced by American conservative politicians and activists, the paper examines the activities of conservative activist Christopher Rufo, the legislation passed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, and the rise of post-liberal, populist Republican candidate Blake Masters, who are sometimes alleged to be inspired or influenced by Viktor Orbán.

The paper finds that American post-liberals have different reasons for rejecting liberalism, and different ideas about what a post-liberal society might look like.

Some believe that the foundations of liberalism are problematic and make a kind of 'false god' out of liberty, and, in doing so encourage behaviour antithetical to the common good. What they share, however, is a belief that the politically and religiously neutral liberal democratic state is collapsing, that future Western governments will therefore be illiberal, and this being so, that state institutions and corporations will either be dominated by 'woke' progressives or social conservatives.

Equally, the paper finds that American post-liberals know little about Hungary and its culture and are not attempting to replicate Orbán style rule in the United States. However, the paper also finds that Orbán is an inspirational figure on the post-liberal right, and that an increasing number of Republican politicians are embracing a post-liberal style of rule in which they use the power of the state to pressure their perceived corporate enemies, and to remove progressives from positions of power within state institutions.

Keywords: Hungary, Viktor Orbán, postliberalism, American conservatives

Abstrakt: Niniejszy artykuł analizuje postliberalizm wyłaniający się na amerykańskiej prawicy politycznej i jego relację z węgierskim postliberalizmem powiązany z Viktorom Orbánem i jego partią rządzącą – Fidesz. Sukces wyborczy, jaki odniósł na Węgrzech Orbán, i przeprowadzona przez niego transformacja Węgier w postliberalną „chrześcijańską demokrację” obudziły zainteresowanie tym państwem wśród wielu społecznych konserwatystów w USA. Dla Amerykanów należących do postliberalnej prawicy rząd Orbána jest wzorem w tym sensie, że ich zdaniem węgierski premier dokonał tego, czego nie potrafiła dokonać amerykańska prawica: uniemożliwił liberałom i postępowcom zawłaszczanie instytucji państwowych i wielkich korporacji. Zainteresowanie amerykańskich postliberałów Orbánem doprowadziło kilku z nich do złożenia mu wizyty, a także do podjęcia decyzji o zorganizowaniu konferencji Conservative Political Action Conference w 2022 r. w Budapeszcie. Niniejszy artykuł przygląda się powodom, dla których tak wielu amerykańskich konserwatystów zaczęło podziwiać postliberalny reżim Orbána na Węgrzech, czego się od niego nauczyli i czy amerykańscy konserwatywni działacze i politycy wprowadzają obecnie w życie nieliberalizm w stylu Orbána na amerykańskim gruncie. Artykuł analizuje wypowiedzi postliberalnych konserwatywnych dziennikarzy, intelektualistów i aktywistów amerykańskich opowiadających się za Orbánem, badając przyczyny ich antypatii do liberalizmu, podziwu dla Orbána i pragnienia sprowadzenia do Ameryki postliberalnych rządów w stylu Orbána. Aby ustalić, czy węgierski postliberalizm jest obecnie praktykowany przez konserwatywnych polityków i aktywistów amerykańskich, artykuł bada działalność konserwatywnego aktywisty Christophera Rufa, ustawodawstwo uchwalone przez gubernatora Florydy Rona DeSantisa, oraz rosnącą popularność postliberalnego, populistycznego kandydata republikanów Blake'a Mastersa, co do których niekiedy uważa się, że inspirowały się Orbánem.

Amerykańscy postliberałowie mają różne powody odrzucenia liberalizmu i różne pomysły na to, jak miałyby wyglądać postliberalne społeczeństwo. Niektórzy są zdania, że problem tkwi w podstawach liberalizmu, które czynią z wolności „fałszywego boga”, a tym samym zachęcają do zachowań antytetycznych wobec dobra wspólnego. Łączy ich przekonanie, że neutralne politycznie i religijnie państwo liberalno-demokratyczne upada, więc przyszłe rządy zachodnie będą nieliberalne, zaś instytucje państwowe i korporacje zostaną zdominowane przez „przebudzonych” postępowców albo konserwatystów społecznych. Artykuł konkluduje, że amerykańscy postliberałowie niewiele wiedzą o Węgrzech i ich kulturze i nie próbują powielać w USA rządów w stylu Orbana. Mimo to premier Węgier jest postacią inspirującą dla postliberalnej prawicy, a coraz większa liczba republikańskich polityków przyjmuje postliberalny styl rządzenia, w którym wykorzystują oni siłę państwa do wywierania presji na tych, których uważają za swoich wspólnych wrogów, oraz do usuwania postępowców ze stanowisk w instytucjach państwowych.

Słowa kluczowe: Węgry, Viktor Orbán, postliberalizm, konserwatyści amerykańscy

Introduction

In 2021, a group of prominent North American social conservatives, including journalists, politicians, lobbyists, and political commentators, converged on Hungary [Zerofsky 2021]. Their purpose was to understand how the country's right-wing populist Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, had managed to not merely win government, but established an “illiberal democracy”, or a post-liberal regime based on Christian values, Hungarian nationalism, and traditional notions of the family and gender [Bíró-Nagy 2017; Plattner 2019; Zerofsky 2021]. The post-liberals who visited Hungary were not part of the elite of the Republican Party, nor were they neoconservatives enthusiastic about the projection of American power, nor libertarians who wish for nothing more than the diminution of the state and its institutions.

Neither can this group be placed within the ‘alt-right’ that was broadly supportive of Donald Trump, or within the ‘paleo-conservatism’ or American nativism of Republican Presidential candidate Patrick J. Buchanan, which serves as an inspiration for the alt-right. Both the contemporary alt-right and Buchanan are significantly more concerned with the racial demographics of the United States than the post-liberals. And while many alt-right activists – like the post-liberals – are increasingly abandoning neoliberal economics [Cooper 2021;

Esposito 2019], the alt-right is primarily concerned with constructing a “white ethno-state” in the United States [Cooper 2021: 42]. The post-liberals, however, contain within them non-white Americans such as Ahmari, and focus more on the religious demographic problem within the United States, especially the decline of Christianity.

Moreover, the election of Trump – celebrated by the alt-right – was met with a mixed reaction by post-liberals such as Rod Dreher, who, in 2016, cautioned Christians against embracing Trump, who he claimed would eventually “stain “everyone who stood with him” [Twitter 2016], and J.D. Vance, who admitted in an interview that he both “loved” and was “terrified” of Trump, who he said spent too much time “appealing to people’s fears, and ...offered zero substance for how to improve their lives” [Dreher 2016].

These post-liberals were, rather, sceptical of the goodness of America’s role in the world, and who no longer believed that the pro-corporate, neoliberal policies of the Republican Party served the interests of the American people. Moreover, many of them were religious conservatives who were becoming increasingly concerned by the decline of Christianity in North America, and who believed this decline was responsible for a crisis of civilizational proportions in the United States, and which threatened Western civilization with extinction. In particular, the manner in which many large American corporations had, throughout 2010s and 2020s, embraced Black Lives Matter, LGBTQI+ jargon, or promoted or lobbied on behalf of other progressive initiatives, disturbed many on the post-liberal right, who perhaps believed that the corporate world would remain a conservative or right-wing dominated space, and were shocked by how quickly the corporate world embraced – at least at a rhetorical level – progressive discourses [Douthat 2018; The Heritage Foundation 2021; Dreher 2021].

In response to the growing power of progressives throughout American public life, a group of disparate conservatives began arguing that the policies of the Republican Party, especially its advocacy of small government, non-intervention in most aspects of people’s public and private lives, freedom of expression, and neoliberal economics, were mistaken [O’Sullivan 2014]. This set of liberal-conservative policies had, they argued, allowed the progressive left to dominate America’s elite spaces, including many corporations and educational institutions [Douthat 2018; The Heritage Foundation 2021; Dreher 2021]. In Viktor Orbán, these conservatives believed they had found a model – if an imperfect one – of

a conservative leader who had defeated the left and found a way to retain power over long periods by constructing a post-liberal regime [Zerofsky 2021; O’Sullivan 2014; Dreher 2022; Caldwell 2019].

Thus, over a period of several years in the 2010s and 2020s, American conservatives, and conservatives from the broader Anglophone world – including opinion journalists Rod Dreher and Tucker Carlson, professor of political science at Notre Dame University Patrick Deneen and Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule, political writer Douglas Murray, late British philosopher Roger Scruton – began making a sort of pilgrimage to Budapest to study Orbán’s successes [Bloodworth 2022; Bherer 2022]. Equally, in 2018, Canadian psychology professor and cultural commentator Jordan Peterson met privately with Orbán in Budapest [Levitz 2022]. Former *National Review* editor John O’Sullivan moved to Budapest, where he serves as the leader of the Hungarian government sponsored pro-Orbán Danube Institution [Tait 2022]. These attempts were largely made on an individual basis until 2021, when a curious sort of study tour was organized. Influential Christian conservative opinion journalist Rod Dreher [2021a], who declared “Hungary is the place to be right now”, provided the impetus for the 2021 Hungarian trip by encouraging popular Fox News television host Tucker Carlson to take an interest in Orbán’s achievements, claimed that Fidesz appears to have achieved what was thought impossible: they had prevented their nation’s elites from capturing the state and driving conservatives from the public sphere [Zerofsky 2021]. Academic Patrick Deneen separately met with Orbán, while Law professor and Catholic integralist Adrian Vermuele and writer Sohrab Ahmari – both recent Catholic converts – approve of Orbán’s ability to fight his enemies on the left and preserve Christian culture in Hungary [Zerofsky 2021]. Republican Congressional candidate for Ohio and author J.D. Vance has also praised elements of Orbán’s rule in Hungary, especially his attempts to increase natural population growth rather than rely on immigration [Vance 2021; Pengelly 2021].

For the American conservatives who have visited Hungary, and who feel as if they have for decades merely watched on as progressives transformed their society – legalizing same-sex marriage, increasing rights and protections for trans people, and most importantly dominating public discourse on issues involving race, gender, and sexuality – Orbán’s apparent political success made Hungary worthy of their interest. Hungary was thus a place worth studying because it was there – under Fidesz’ right-wing populist regime – that conservatives had apparently found a way to stop the left winning culture wars and dominating the public sphere, and

where a new post-liberal order appeared to be taking shape. The journeys made by American conservatives to Hungary have understandably attracted some negative media attention, particularly from left-wing publications. To their liberal and left-wing critics, these conservatives are either the naïve, who do not understand the dark reality of Orbán authoritarian regime, or knowingly embracing a far-right dictator. Moreover, critics have consistently accused American post-liberals of attempting to bring Orbán's allegedly far-right authoritarianism to the United States [Beauchamp 2022; Kim 2022]. Among these critics was neoconservative Bill Kristol [2021], who, in a tweet, claimed that "DeSantis" was "following Orbán's lead", illustrating the growing divide on the right between those who support liberal democracy and those who either believe it has failed or find it antithetical to their political ideology. What is often missing from this discussion is an examination of conservatives' statements about Orbán and Fidesz, and a more thoughtful consideration of what Orbán means to American conservatives, and what they seek to learn from his governing style and political ideology. At the same time, it is also important to examine whether American conservatives have begun to put into practice what they have learned from Orbán. This paper examines why so many Americans conservatives have come to admire Orbán's 'post-liberal' regime in Hungary, what they have learned from Orbán, and investigates whether American conservative activists and politicians are now putting Orbán style illiberalism into practice in American politics.

This article examines a group of 'post-liberal' public intellectuals and political figures in the United States, who share both a rejection of liberalism, which they believe has become an existential threat to Western Civilization, and a belief that Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary provides a model for a successful transition from a liberal to a post-liberal society. The article cannot study all post-liberal intellectuals and political figures, but rather discusses several of the most prominent, including journalists and writers Rod Dreher, Sohrab Ahmari, Gladden Pappin, Tucker Carlson, and John O'Sullivan – all of whom have developed institutional ties to Hungary and Orbán. For example, Dreher and Pappin were visiting fellows at Hungary's Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), a private college for advanced studies, which is closely associated with Orbán and funded in part by his government [Kalan 2020; MCC Website 2021]. Carlson is also associated with the MCC and gave a speech at its conference "MCC Feszt" in 2021 [Youtube 2021]. Dreher, moreover, was also a Visiting Fellow at the Danube Institute. There are close financial and institutional ties between these writers and the Orbán government, although this does not mean that they should be considered mouthpieces

of the government. Rather, it shows a level of transnational organisation and commitment to the post-liberal cause. The article also studies the examples of political activist Christopher Rufo and Republican politicians Ron DeSantis, Governor of Florida, and Senate candidates Blake Masters and J.D. Vance, all of whom are increasingly influenced by post-liberal thought and are extending it into the American political realm.

The paper limits the study to the years 2016-2022, a period which began with the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and ends with the appearance of Viktor Orbán at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) conference in Dallas, Texas, in November 2022, and during which the influence of post-liberals over the Republican Party and wider American right appears to have increased.

Orbán's appeal to American social conservatives

Perhaps the key reason behind North American conservatives' interest in Orbán is his opposition to liberalism and attempts to build a post-liberal or non-liberal regime in Hungary. If one idea animates this group of American social conservatives, it is a shared antipathy to or disillusionment with liberalism. Liberalism is a somewhat complex and contested term [Bell 2014], and therefore it is best to try to understand how the term is understood by post-liberals. Indeed, on the surface, it may appear that American post-liberals who have visited Hungary – and in some cases met with Orbán – perceive social progressives associated with identity politics-based movements (particularly on issues related to gender, race, and sexuality) as their primary political enemies. This is only partially true. While conservatives may abhor the social changes driven by the far-left, liberalism and liberals also serve as their movement's antagonists. This is not because conservatives believe liberals are ultimately pushing for a redefining of gender and sexual norms; rather, they believe that liberalism has created the grounds for a dangerous left-wing movement to achieve political success.

At the same time, it is not easy to describe post-liberalism. There is no single post-liberal doctrine. What post-liberals share, however, is a belief that liberalism has failed and that while elements of the ideology are efficacious, liberalism's eroding of traditional forms of identity, culture, and its homogenizing effects are deleterious and ought to be combated. Post-liberalism is largely therefore a conservative phenomenon, though usually nationalist in orientation, wary of the power of neo-liberal capitalism to disrupt societies, and unsympathetic toward American

foreign policy. Conservative post-liberal political thinker Patrick J. Deneen – who has met and spoken at times favorably of Orbán – [Kaszás 2019] argues that many of today’s problems, including the rise of a new global elite, a “deracinated, unplaced, dehistoricized people, who flock to cities like New York and London”, are the products of the inherent flaws of liberal ideology [Hogan 2018].

“Liberalism has failed”, Deneen [2018: 3] writes in *Why Liberalism Failed* “not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded.” Liberalism, “a political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and ...expand liberty”, he argues, “in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom. [Deneen 2018: 3].

Deneen [2018: 5] describes liberalism as “more insidious” than its “curlier competitor ideologies” insofar as compared with other ideologies. In contrast to its crueler competitor ideologies, liberalism is more insidious insofar as “it pretends to neutrality, claiming no preference and denying any intention of shaping the souls under its rule. It ingratiates by invitation to the easy liberties, diversions, and attractions of freedom, pleasure, and wealth. It makes itself invisible, much as a computer’s operating system goes largely unseen—until it crashes. Far from creating free environments, “the ‘limited government’ of liberalism today,” he writes, “would provoke jealousy and amazement from tyrants of old, who could only dream of such extensive capacities for surveillance and control of movement, finances, and even deeds and thoughts. The liberties that liberalism was brought into being to protect—individual rights of conscience, religion, association, speech, and self-governance—are extensively compromised by the expansion of government activity into every area of life. Yet this expansion continues, largely as a response to people’s felt loss of power over the trajectory of their lives in so many distinct spheres—economic and otherwise—leading to demands for further intervention by the one entity even nominally under their control” [Deneen 2018: 7].

The result of liberalism is an “anti-culture” in which we are able to live the same everywhere: a homogenized, standardized, monoculture” [Hogan 2018]. This, however, causes great alienation within society among the “losers” of globalization, who suffer in this new environment of great wealth and income inequality and the destruction of culture “[Deneen 2018, 9-10]. In our liberal age the losers of globalization, Deneen [2018: 9-10] writes, “are consoled with the reminder that

they are wealthy beyond compared to even the wealthiest aristocrats of an earlier age”. Yet while “material comforts are a ready salve for the discontents of the soul”, the alienation of the rich from the poor generates a cultural gulf between the two groups, and “as the reactions in the urban centers to the outcome of the Brexit vote and the election of Donald J. Trump evince, those same leaders are shocked that the terms of the social contract appear not to be acceptable to Walmart shoppers “ [Deneen 2018 9-10].

This homogenized world is perhaps what many social conservatives protest against and why they feel drawn to what they believe is occurring in Poland and Hungary, and to other places in which governments appear to be defending traditional identities, cultures, and ways of life from liberalism. The core aim of the liberal powers, Deneen claims, is to turn religious, family, and geographic identity from key aspects of personal identity into “one option among many”, and moreover to diminish the power of these forms of identity [Hogan 2018].

Atomized, poorly socialized millennials who produce few or no children, do not attend religious services, and no longer identify with a religion or nation, Deneen suggests, may lack ontological security, and may in response choose to assume a primarily political identity linked to a despotic leader or authoritarian movement [Hogan 2018]. The rise of the Trump movement, then, may be comprehended as a product of liberalism’s tendency to diminish traditional forms of identity and replace them with a political identity, or perhaps even liberalism’s tendency to replace religion with politics. Equally, this perspective suggests that other forms of identity politics may also be understood as surrogate religions, or at least alternative belief systems, that give individuals the identity and ontological security they otherwise lack in a world dominated by liberalism. Thus, liberalism generates out of its flaws unhappy and unmoored individuals, who rejected traditional forms of identity and meaning, and who thus attempt to replace these with new forms of community and identity based on political, or sexual, or gender affiliation. In other words, liberalism unchecked produces by accident its own “successor ideology”, to use American social commentator Wesley Yang’s term for the progressive discourse that swept the Anglophone world in the 2010s, and which Yang describes as a form of “authoritarian utopianism” based on concepts such as intersectionality, anti-racism, and race, gender, and sexuality-based identity politics [West 2020].

Yang appears to believe that it is largely a lack of courage that prevents liberals from defending their system from proponents of the successor ideology. Post-liberal

thinkers, however, argue that liberalism's inherent flaws – in particularly the wealth and income inequalities it creates, and liberal's indulgent attitude toward illiberal 'social justice' activists – are primarily responsible for the retreat of liberalism throughout the West and rise of authoritarianism. Dreher, for example, writes that while he still believes "in liberal democratic ideals like free speech and freedom of religion", American liberals have failed to protect these values from the authoritarian left [Dreher: 2021a]. He therefore claims it is necessary for conservatives to examine the success right-wing populist politician Viktor Orbán has experienced fighting his culture wars, and perhaps "learn some lessons from ...Orbán and make them work in our American context" [Dreher: 2021a].

Despite Orbán's illiberal actions, which Dreher admits trouble him, Hungary and Poland, he writes, are places to which conservatives must look toward with hope and as examples of how conservatives can beat the progressive left [Dreher: 2021a]. What, then, is Viktor Orbán's critique of liberalism, what kind of post-liberal regime is he constructing in Hungary, and why does his rule serve as a model for so many American post-liberals?

Orbán's critique of liberalism

Fidesz (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége – Alliance of Young Democrats) has its beginnings in an anti-communist student movement in the 1980, and transformed into a political party in 1989, participating in the National Roundtable talks of that year [Bozóki 2000: 245; Ádám and Bozóki 2016: 132]. During this period Fidesz "advocated liberal reforms and were quick to condemn nationalist and antisemitic undercurrents in the governing coalition" [Kenes, 2020], but turned toward the social conservative right after 1995. In the period that followed, Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán and his party began call for the protection of Magyar traditions, and traditional values rooted in Christianity [Lendvai 2019]. The party briefly took power in 1998, but it was not until the 2010 elections that Fidesz, now an illiberal, nationalist, right-wing populist movement, solidified its domination over Hungarian politics. [Ádám and Bozóki 2016: 130-131; Buzogány 2017]. Fidesz relies heavily on Christian identitarian and civilizationalist (or 'clash of civilizations') rhetoric [Fekete 2017], and has implemented illiberal policies, purported to defend Hungary's traditional values, including the removing of official accreditation of Gender Studies as a university subject [Szubori 2018].

Orbán has described contemporary Hungary under his party's rule as an "illiberal state" [Website of the Hungarian Government 2014]. However, he has also claimed

that his illiberalism does not “reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom” [Website of the Hungarian Government 2014]. What, then, is Orbán’s argument against liberalism if he, too, defends basic liberal ideals?

While Orbán might call himself a non-liberal, his major quarrel with liberals appears to be their insistence on dominating the public sphere. Indeed, he claims he is “fighting liberals for freedom”, and moreover claims that he is “on the side of freedom” whereas liberals are “on the side of the hegemony of opinion”. [Orbán 2021]. Furthermore, Orbán claims that liberals have abandoned democracy and instead embraced “liberal non-democracy” [Orban 2021]. The problem with liberals, Orbán argues, is that they attempt to control all public and private discourse, chiefly by “stigmatising conservatives and Christian Democrats and sidelining them” [Orbán 2021].

Orbán argues that liberal democracy is “shipwrecked” and has a superior alternative in “Christian democracy” [Reuters 2018]. The key difference between the two lies in the way the latter protects the “freedom” and “security” of the people, “supports the traditional family model of one man and one woman, keeps anti-Semitism at bay, and gives a chance for growth” [Reuters 2018]. Christian democracy, according to Orbán, “is not liberal. Liberal democracy is liberal, while Christian democracy is not liberal; it is, if you like, illiberal” [Nyssönen, Metsälä 2021]. Where liberalism is dominant, Orbán claims, democracy has disappeared. “Liberal non-democracy”, he says, “includes liberalism, but doesn’t include democracy” [Orbán 2021].

When in power, liberals, Orbán appears to be arguing, will encourage or permit multiculturalism, mass immigration, and the disrupting of the traditional family model through the promotion of alternative types of families [e.g. families with two mothers, or two fathers, in homosexual relationships]. At its most extreme, this ‘liberalism’ permits the ‘successor ideology’ to take root, and thus allows the cementing of a set of beliefs and practices that, once dominant, create an environment in which heterodox views are often no longer tolerated, and the wants and desires of the majority group in a society are disregarded by an elite that prefers to centre the rights and interests of minorities.

Orbán’s illiberal Christian democracy, however, rejects multiculturalism and minority rights in favour of the hegemony of a single Christian set of values, opposes mass immigration and instead encourages Hungarians to have more children, and, in

an effort to increase the Hungarian population, seeks to discourage homosexuality and instead encourage heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family [Szikra 2014]. Nations that become dominated by ‘liberalism’, such as Germany, welcome mass immigration that ultimately, Orbán claims, leads to the diminishing of Christian values and identity and the creation of parallel societies and social strife, problems he did not “wish ...on my own country” [Orbán 2021]. Moreover, once these new liberal, post-Christian multicultural societies are established in Western Europe, he claims, it is entirely possible that they will not be capable of maintaining any kind of internal stability. Central Europe, Orbán argues, which is increasingly illiberal, will not become destabilised. Rather, in nations like Hungary, he claims, “our children will live much better than us. Indeed, under Christian illiberal democracy, he says, there will be “a great central European renaissance in terms of the economy, demography, security policy and culture” [Orbán 2021].

It is not difficult to comprehend why American post-liberals approve of Orbán’s critique of liberalism. Dreher [2020], for example, argues that liberalism has pushed America into its own ‘Weimar’ period of extreme decadence. Ahmari [2019] appears to agree with this assessment and blames liberals and liberalism for a variety of different problems facing the United States, including the nation’s ever decreasing fertility rate and its problem with mass shootings. In place of liberalism, Ahmari calls for a return to classical Christian philosophy and to a “politics of limits”, which would “tame Big Tech and tax well-endowed elite universities, to re-enact Sunday trading bans, guarantee paid family leave”, and “shield children from LGBT indoctrination” [Ahmari, 2019]. Moreover, Ahmari calls for the “public square” to be “reoriented to “the common good and ultimately the Highest Good” [Ahmari, 2019]. Unlike Dreher, who appears to mourn the death of liberalism, and believe that American liberals are either unable or unwilling to defend what they perceive to be core American and Christian values, Ahmari claims liberalism’s core principles (which he describes as confused) an antithetical to a healthy society [Ahmari, 2019].

“*Progressive liberals*”, Ahmari writes, “are quite open about their aim: to raze all structures that stand in the way of an empire of autonomy-maximizing norms” [Ahmari 2019]. “*Conservative liberals and libertarians*”, he continues, “share in this view of the highest good: The unfettered life is the best life. Most recognize the need for some limits, at least against freedoms that harm others. But the regulative ideal remains always operative: an ideal of ever-greater autonomy won through the removal of limits” [Ahmari 2019].

Liberal's desire for freedom, Ahmari writes, has led to many of America's deepest problems, which liberals now struggle to solve. For example, the liberalism of the sexual revolution created a generation of "caddish men", who abused women and created a backlash more recently in the form of the "#metoo" movement [Ahmari 2019]. Despite the different perspectives on liberalism and its problems, both Dreher and Ahmari agree liberals allow the far-left to mainstream a wide variety of social practices contrary to the traditional Christian values of Western civilization. Thus, for both Dreher and Ahmari, though for slightly different reasons, Orbán's concept of 'Christian democracy' holds enormous appeal.

For Dreher, Orbán's post-liberal regime does not entirely do away with the aspects of liberalism he holds dear (such as freedom of speech) yet prevents the progressive left from dominating the public sphere. For Ahmari, however, Orbán is to be praised because, like Poland's leaders, he promotes "the economic well-being" of Hungary's people, reverses the nation's demographic declines, and is restoring Hungary's Christian culture [Ahmari 2019a]. Indeed, Ahmari approvingly observes that "to reverse demographic course, the Orbán government introduced a series of reforms in the tax code aimed at encouraging larger families: Women who have at least four children are exempt from income taxes for the rest of their lives; families with at least three children receive cash assistance toward the purchase of vans; the government also offers them low-interest loans toward housing expenses." This resulted, Aharmi writes, in Hungary's fertility rate rising from "1.4 in 2010" to 1.8 in 2019 [Ahmari,2019a].

Writing in *The American Conservative*, Rod Dreher [2022] admits that he "would prefer the flawed liberal democracy that we had in our country until about thirty years ago, to the illiberal secularist democracy now coming into existence ...that renders people like me into enemies of the people". "We all seem to be barrelling towards a future that is not liberal and democratic, but is going to be either left illiberalism, or right illiberalism," Dreher [2022] writes. "If that's true, then I know which side I'm on: the side that isn't going to persecute me and my people."

Indeed, Dreher's problem is not so much with liberalism per se, but with liberals' inability to stop the left's capturing institutions within the once liberal and thus open public sphere. Progressives, he writes [Dreher 2022] echoing Orbán, "don't want democracy" but rather prefer "illiberal leftism". The "illiberal left" having "completed their march through the institutions" are now "consolidating"

their power “in part by making cultural and religious conservatives into pariahs” [Dreher 2022].

Dreher’s post-liberalism is thus not exactly an attack on the foundations of liberalism, but rather a response to what he perceives to be the collapse of the liberal centre in American politics, and the rise of extremes. Yet rather than try to defend liberalism, which Dreher no longer believes is worthwhile or possible, he calls for conservatives to follow the lead of Orbán and the Law and Justice Party in Poland and embrace centralisation of power in the hands of a conservative government. Thus Dreher [2022] claims that the “Standard GOP right-liberalism is a dead end that is resulting in the subjugation of the unwoke.” In other words, conservatives, in his view, should no longer advocate for the neutral state, because this neutral state no longer has any genuinely liberal defenders. Rather, most of the state’s institutions have been captured by non-liberal leftists, who use it to spread their anti-Christian ‘woke’ agenda and create a “civilizational crisis” which threatens the existence of the Christian West [Dreher 2022]

Dreher [2021] also calls on conservatives to stop accepting “unbridled corporate power” and “to repent” that they ever allowed corporations the power to harm the common good”.

A similar point is made by another influential post-liberals, deputy editor of American Affairs, Gladden Pappin. Pappin claims that the United States federal government should make it their policy to “enable the traditional family” and allow it to “flourish at the heart of society” [Sargent 2022]. He calls for the defence of the “traditional” family through the creation of a “nationally instituted family wage” and contends that “while family must by natural law mean that of a husband, wife and children, legislators must positively use state power to make family life possible and choice-worthy” [Sargent 2022].

These ideas are not confined to opinion journalists. Republican senate candidate Blake Masters, inspired by this notion, runs advertisements declaring that it his belief that “In America, you should be able to raise a family on one single income” [Masters 2021].

Anglo-American conservative writer and Danube Institute leader John O’Sullivan, who has vocally supported Orbán in *National Review*, further explains Orbán’s appeal to American post-liberals. He describes how populist conservatives, like

Orbán, believe that liberals have increasingly abandoned democracy to protect liberal values and mores. He claims that liberals “cannot trust democracy to pass the laws that would achieve universal liberation” and thus they “seek to constitutionalize the rights of oppressed minorities and to limit the power of democratic majorities to object to the consequences” [O’Sullivan 2014].

O’Sullivan [2014] furthermore argues that as these liberal rights “multiply, democracy exercises less and less control over government and law”. Instead, he suggests, bureaucracy and the judiciary assume greater powers over society, and in doing so stifle democracy and the will of the majority [O’Sullivan 2014]. Thus, unlike liberals in previous generations who called for a marketplace of ideas, free expression, and supported democracy, contemporary liberals, O’Sullivan argues, despise democracy because they simply do not trust the majority population to make the ‘correct’ political decisions [O’Sullivan 2014]. Orbán, according to O’Sullivan [2014], has recognized this problem, and has consequently sought to stand up for the democratic rights of the majority by using illiberal means to prevent liberals from achieving hegemony over Hungarian society. American post-liberals, too, O’Sullivan [2014] observes, increasingly recognize that liberals no longer support the democratic part of ‘liberal democracy’, and therefore look to Orbán to provide them with a model with which they too can push back against liberal hegemony.

Thus, Orbán shares with these American post-liberals an enmity with liberalism born not so much out of a hatred of key liberal ideals, but out of what liberalism permits and the manner in which liberalism is often unable to curtail the rise of far-left movements inimical to both liberal ideals but also traditional Christian values. Equally, both American post-liberals and Orbán share a concern that the democratic will of the majority is being curtailed by an increasingly anti-democratic liberalism, which seeks to centre the interests of minority groups through the constitutionalization of rights and constrain the power of the majority population to object to these changes.

Orbán’s post-liberal regime

In place of liberalism, then, Orbán seeks to create what he calls Christian democracy in Hungary. His government, however, is best described as right-wing populist.

Populism, particularly European populism, is most commonly described as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which

argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people [Mudde 2004: 543]. Mudde [2017] admits that “several ideologies are based upon ...opposition between the people and the elite”, including socialism. However, unlike socialism, which is based upon class distinctions between people and elite, populism, Mudde claims, is “based on the concept of morality” [Mudde 2017]. In populism, “the people” and “elites” are morally distinct insofar – he argues – as the people are pure and authentic and good, and elites are inauthentic, and therefore impure and corrupt [Mudde 2017].

However, this essential purity is not at its core ethnic or racial, but moral [Mudde 2017]. Indeed, Mudde writes, populists believe that elites come from ‘the people’ but have chosen to abandon the morals of ‘the people’ and betray their interests. Elites, instead, he argues, put their own interests above those of ‘the people’ and live according to a different set of morals [Mudde, 2017]. Because Mudde argues, the distinction between ‘the people’ and ‘elites’ is based on morality and not class or ethnicity, millionaires and members of ethnic minorities “can be considered more authentic representatives of the people than leaders with a more common socio-economic status” or who belong to the majority ethnic group” [Mudde 2017].

At best a thin-ideology or loose set of ideas, populism is a relatively empty concept, which must be combined with other ideas or a ‘thick’ ideology (e.g., socialism, neoliberalism, religion) to become coherent. Fidesz and its leader Viktor Orbán have been described as a right-wing populists [Ádám, Bozóki 2016; Yilmaz, Morieson 2021] insofar as they combine populism with a right-wing political programme.

Like many other European right-wing populists, Orbán posits that the ordinary people of his nation suffer from two threats. One of these threats come from the top of society, that is from Hungary’s ‘elite’, whom Orbán charges with corruption, and who he claims support liberal policies that undermine the sovereignty of the people, and ultimately threaten the existence of Christian and Western civilization in Hungary, and therefore constitute an existential threat to Hungary’s people and culture [Yilmaz, Morieson 2021] The second threat comes not from the top, but horizontally from different groups of people within Hungary and from abroad. This horizontal threat includes LGBT activists and Muslim immigrants [ibid.]. Orbán, furthermore, claims that Hungary’s elite would, due to their liberal ideology, permit mass immigration from Muslim majority nations, and in doing so flood Hungary with people from a foreign civilization incompatible with Hungarian culture and the broadly Christian civilization to which his nation belongs [ibid.].

Much of Orbán's success lies in his ability to construct this populist division, which combines Hungarian nationalism and clash of civilizations rhetoric, and portray himself as the saviour of the people, and the one person who can stand athwart history and prevent the destruction of Christian civilization in Hungary. Orbán has achieved a measure of success in his culture war against progressivism and liberalism. His Fidesz party has dominated Hungarian politics since 2010, and his brand of right-wing populism has proven popular with a large segment of the electorate. During Fidesz' time in power, and as part of his attempt to create a 'Christian democracy' in Hungary, Orbán has actively replaced liberal and progressive 'elites' within Hungary's political system, bureaucracy, and media, and sought to either remove them or replace them with his own supporters and acolytes [Bozóki 2012; Lamour 2021; Szikra 2014].

Describing his rule as "subtle" compared with the "vulgar" and violently repressive authoritarian regimes of the 20th century, Aris Roussinos describes Orbán as "a product of George Soros's attempt to nurture an elite governing class in Central Europe", and describes the Fidesz leader as a "disaffected liberal reformer" who "adopted and inverted the same methods that produce liberal hegemony towards distinctly post-liberal ends" [Roussinos 2022].

There is some truth to this. However, Fidesz' populism leads them to embrace a form of democracy at odds with liberalism. For example, Western liberals have mostly strengthened the rule of law and increased the power of the judiciary in attempts recognize gay rights, trans rights, and women's rights. Fidesz, in a typically populist manner, has weakened the rule of law in Hungary, and altered the constitution in ways that strengthen the party's centralized rule, diminishing the traditional checks and balances on government power [Bugaric, Kuhelj 2018]. Equally, Fidesz' populism allows the party to hold 'national consultation surveys' [Pócsa, Oross 2022] on issues such as LGBT education in Hungary's schools, and on immigration, which would never be permitted in other Western nations due in part to the possibility that the public would vote the 'wrong' way. Fidesz has also legislated to "remove accreditation from Gender Studies MA programs in Hungarian universities" [Kováts 2020: 76].

Orbán [Website of the Hungarian Government 2019], in a speech to the 2nd International Conference on the Persecution of Christians, held in Budapest in November, 2019, remarked that "the only thing that can save Europe" from Islamization and religious persecution at the hands of Muslims is for Europe to

find “its way back to the source of its true values: to Christian identity”. Orbán [Website of the Hungarian Government 2019] furthermore claimed that by giving persecuted Christians “homes, hospitals” and “schools” in Hungary, Europeans receive in return what the continent “most needs: Christian faith, love and perseverance”.

His words echo the founder and *de facto* leader of Poland’s ruling Law and Justice Party Jaroslaw Kaczyński’s stated desire to save Europe through re-Christinization [Prończuk 2019]. However, Orbán appears less interested in converting Hungarians and other Europeans to Christianity. Rather, he says believes that even atheists in Europe are Christian in a cultural sense, and therefore desires only that Hungarians adhere to traditional Hungarian values and social mores derived from Christian teachings [Walker 2019].

It is difficult, then, to claim that Orbán is a religious populist, insofar as he does not chiefly encourage Christian belief, Christian spirituality, or churchgoing among his supporters or wider Hungarian society, though he does appear to believe these are indeed good things [Website of the Hungarian Government 2019]. Equally, his value system never supersedes his nationalism, and desire to protect Hungarian sovereignty. To his genuinely religious Christian conservative supporters abroad, however, Orbán’s brand of right-wing populism is protecting Christianity and Christian identity in Hungary, making Hungary a bastion of Christian civilization within Europe, and preventing the eradication of Hungary’s unique Christian based culture and identity – actions they wish to emulate within their own polities. Orbán’s post-liberalism and apparent post-secularism – at least insofar as he attempts to inculcate Christian identity and conservative social values (if not religious belief and practice) within ordinary Hungarians – greatly impresses many American social conservatives, and many are more than willing to either overlook or indeed embrace Orbán’s non-liberal political practices if it means finding a way to combat progressives.

For example, Ahmari and Vermuele argue that a strong Christian oriented state is required to prevent the destruction of Western civilization, and that the United States must abandon liberalism to save itself and the West [Ahmari 2019; Vermuele 2020]. Ahmari, for example, claims that liberalism tolerates events such as ‘Drag Queen Story Hour’, in which a female impersonator is invited to a library to read a book to small children [Wallace-Wells, 2019]. Such an event, Ahmari says, ought not to be tolerated, because they have the potential to damage children [Youtube

2019]. Yet his animus is not so much applied against the Drag Queen in question, nor towards the progressives who set up such events, but rather with the liberal ethos of American society which demands the toleration of this ‘aberrant’ behaviour. It hardly requires saying that Drag Queen Story Hour is near impossible in Hungary, which is perhaps one reason Ahmari rejects criticism of Hungary and its Prime Minister by “Western elites” [Ahmari 2019a].

Thus, for post-liberals, Hungary is to be studied because its government would not, despite the pressure applied by the European Union and United States, legalize same-sex marriage [although such marriages performed elsewhere in the European Union are recognized in Hungary], allow gay couples to access IVF treatment, or adopt children, or allow trans people to serve in the military. Equally – and perhaps more importantly to many of the American post-liberals drawn to Hungary – Fidesz would not permit progressive American political and social discourse to become normalized in Hungary’s educational institutions including its universities. Indeed, the party curtailed the teaching of Gender Studies on the grounds that it was an “ideology” and not a true “science” that sought to normalize notions such as gender fluidity [Apperly 2019]. Hungary would not permit large scale immigration which rapidly altered Hungarian identity. Nor would the Orbán led government promote Critical Race Theory and teach that all material differences between racial groups were the product of white supremacy.

At the same time, Orbán was declaring that the Christian values of Europe were threatened by liberalism, and that he would defend Hungary’s Christian values – and indeed Europe’s Judeo-Christian civilization – from progressives who sought to destroy Christianity and the family in the name of social justice. Globalization, according to Orbán, was homogenizing the world, destroying the sovereignty of smaller nations like his own, and replacing unique national cultures with a single cosmopolitan culture based on progressive American culture and values. As we have seen, in place of a liberal ideology that discourages people from having children, Orbán has sought to create a pro-family environment in Hungary, in which couples that have children are financially rewarded by the government]. Orbán, furthermore, has sought to bring together Church and state, and under his rule Christianity has become the “unifying force of the nation” that gives “the inner essence and meaning of the state” [Ádám and Bozóki 2016, 137]. His Fidesz party has sought to institutionalize Christianity by financing Church administered hospitals and universities [Ádám, Bozóki 2016: 142-143].

Of course, American post-liberals are not particularly interested in Hungarian culture and its revival *per se*. Rather, as conservative New York Times columnist Ross Douthat explains, Orbán's "interventions in Hungarian cultural life, the attacks on liberal academic centres and the spending on conservative ideological projects, are seen [by American conservatives] as examples of how political power might curb progressivism's influence" [Douthat 2021].

Bringing Orbán style post-liberalism to the United States

American post-liberals believe there is much they can learn from Orbán's relative success in preventing liberal hegemony over the public sphere, and moreover from his long rule over Hungary and establishing of an illiberal democracy. Carlson, for example, has described Hungary under Fidesz' rule as "a small country with lots of lessons for the rest of us" [New York Times 2021]. According to the Fox News host, while the American "elite ... hates the American people", Orbán "is defending democracy against the unaccountable billionaires, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and certain western governments. He is fighting for democracy against those forces which would like to bury it." [BBC 2021].

Dreher, in a similar way, tells conservatives to go to Hungary and learn for themselves how they can end the left's hegemony over public life. "If Americans want to see the conservatism of the future," he writes, "they should go to Budapest and learn how and why to use state power for conservative ends. You and I as American conservatives might prefer to live in a world of "small government," but that ideology is no match for powerful culturally left-wing institutions (like, incredibly, major corporations) that aim to subjugate and destroy the ideals and institutions we conservatives value" [Dreher 2022a].

According to Dreher [2022a], the United States suffers under "woke capitalism", in which "every institution in American life" has been captured "by woke ideologues". He asks, rhetorically, "if not for the state stepping in to protect families and institutions from the predation of entities like the Walt Disney Company, who will?" [Dreher 2022a]. Dreher [2022a] describes the hegemonic power of the left in American life by relating an anecdote in which a Christian man, who works for an "woke" liberal American technology firm, describes how he must "lie" every day about his personal beliefs just to keep his job.

With this in mind, he declares that in order for Christians to feel comfortable expressing their opinions in the workplace political change is necessary. Therefore,

he advocates electing big government conservatives such as Josh Hawley and J.D Vance and, especially, Florida governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican, who take coercive action against corporations that try to force ‘woke’ or excessively left-wing opinions on their staff [Dreher 2022b].

It is not merely opinion journalists who are supporting these big government post-liberal candidates. Billionaire Peter Thiel, for example, donated \$13.5 million to Vance’s campaign, and gave \$10 million to help elect Arizona senate candidate Blake Masters [Niquette 2022]. The backing of not merely influential opinion makers but billionaires make post-liberal right candidates – especially if they can also secure the rhetorical support of Donald Trump – a powerful group within the Republican Party.

Thus, whether or not they are influenced directly by Orbán’s behaviour, there is evidence that post-liberal American conservative politicians and activists are abandoning their ‘small government’, automatically pro-corporation policies, and beginning to use their institutional power to attack corporations that promote a left-wing progressive or ‘woke’ agenda. Ron DeSantis’ actions as governor of Florida provide another example of the post-liberal, big government agenda. DeSantis’ “Stop WOKE act”, his “Parental rights in Education” bill, often derided by Democrats as the “Don’t say gay” bill, and his attacks on the Disney Corporation following their sharp criticism of the bill, are examples of a conservative using the power of the state to attempt to remove left-wing hegemony over institutions of state and corporations.

DeSantis’ bill [House Bill (1557) 2022], which made illegal the teaching of gender identity and sexuality issues in kindergarten to third grade, was criticized for being hostile to gay and trans students and teachers by Disney [Oshin 2022]. In response, DeSantis brought the power of the state against the Disney corporation, revoking their partial tax exemption and suggesting he would end their copyright extensions in the state of Florida [Faughnder 2022]. Moderate Republicans including Maryland governor Larry Hogan were generally not supportive of DeSantis’ actions, and many criticised the Florida governor for punishing a corporation for merely exercising freedom of expression [Shapero 2022]. Here lies an important difference between the ‘liberal’ and moderate Republicans and the ‘new’ post-liberal right. Where the previous generation of conservatives assumed that big government was the key progressive force in American life, the nationalist conservative right has recognised that corporations, too, can be a progressive force, and

that far from being an enemy, big government is often the only force capable of pushing back against the power of progressivism in the public sphere.

Left-wing writer Zach Beauchamp [2022] claims that, by taking this action against Disney and against the teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools, DeSantis “has steadily put together a policy agenda with strong echoes of Orbán’s governing ethos — one in which an allegedly existential cultural threat from the left justifies aggressive uses of state power against the right’s enemies”.

He further observes that DeSantis has given Florida’s “state regulators the power to fine social media companies if state authorities determined they improperly ‘deplatformed’ a political candidate for office” [Beauchamp 2022]

Yet DeSantis’ signature pieces of legislation were in part the work of a relatively young conservative activist who has appeared several times on Tucker Carlson’s Fox News show, Christopher Rufo. Rufo, more than any other activist, has brought the nationalist conservative right into the national spotlight through his successful campaigning against the teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools. He supports DeSantis’ anti-woke initiatives and attacks on Disney and calls for further action against other corporations that do not serve the “common good” or the “country” [Joyce 2022].

At first, Rufo’s chief concern was so-called anti-racism training based on Critical Race Theory in schools, which he argues are often divisive and themselves a form of racism. Having convinced DeSantis to ban anti-racism efforts based on Critical Race Theory, Rufo began to complain about corporate efforts to advance a progressive agenda in the United States. He used an internal Disney video to argue that the corporation was filled with progressive who were attempting to insert material into their films and television shows that would “fundamentally change the relationship between kids and sexuality in the United States.” [Joyce 2022].

When Disney began to criticise DeSantis’ “Parental rights in Education” bill, Rufo began claiming progressives were “grooming” children to become “social justice warriors” [Rufo, 2022]. Rufo continued to use terms such as ‘groomer’ and ‘grooming’ and began to describe on Twitter the many cases in which public school teachers had been convicted of sexually abusing children, in an effort to show that this “grooming” was indeed taking place and required decisive action [Chait 2022].

Rufo is spearheading a new and more formidable conservative movement, one comfortable with claiming that the Disney corporation is “grooming” children, and with using the power of the state to attack corporations and public institutions dominated by progressives, or what he calls progressive “cartel organizations, ideological and economic cartels, dictating the terms from up on high down to the average citizen” [Joyce 2022]. Indeed, Rufo has declared that conservatives must lay “siege to the institutions” of the left [Rufo 2022a].

It is important to note, however, that Rufo has not visited Hungary, or expressed admiration for Orbán, and therefore whether he draws any inspiration for concrete action from Orbán is unknown. Equally, there is no reason to believe that Ron DeSantis is attempting to emulate the rule of Viktor Orbán, despite some important similarities. Rather, all three men are perhaps reacting to the same core problem in their polities: the dominant position of the progressive left in education, entertainment, the bureaucracy, and increasingly within large and multinational corporations. Equally, all are concluding that there is only one solution to this problem: the centralisation of power in state hands, and the punishing of institutions and corporations that do not serve their conception of the common good. In other words, whether or not Rufo and DeSantis are directly influenced by Orbán, they too are embracing a post-liberal form of politics.

At the same time, many American conservatives -- particularly journalists such as Dreher and Carlson -- are directly influenced by Orbán and are impressed by his ability to wield state power to assist conservative causes. While these conservatives, even if they have visited Hungary, may not understand the intricacies of Hungarian politics, or particularly care about several of the issues which most concern Orbán (including his desire for increased Hungarian sovereignty within the European Union, his attempts to prevent Muslim immigration -- an issue which no longer appears to animate the American right -- and promotion of Hungarian ethnic identity) the mere example of Orbán as a strong leader who defeated the left serves to inspire and invigorate American post-liberals. Equally, they share with Orbán a discourse that emphasizes the existential nature of the challenge of the left. For Orbán and America's post-liberals, the progressive or 'woke' left is a threat to the Christian derived values that underpin Western Civilization, insofar as progressives seek to overturn the traditional ideas of sexuality and gender, and attempt -- through Critical Race Theory -- to demonize Europeans and ultimately make them minorities groups within the nations they founded or in which they are indigenous. And because Orbán is perceived to have 'saved' his nation from

Muslim invasion and from progressive domination, American post-liberals see in his post-liberal centralisation of power and domination of the public sphere a method by which Christian based Western civilization in the United States might also be saved. Equally, American conservatives see in Orbán not an anti-democratic, authoritarian dictator, but a true democrat, who fights for his nation and its people, and against progressives who, having begun to dominate the once neutral liberal public sphere, now seek “to constitutionalize the rights of oppressed minorities”, and attack democracy and the will of the people by limiting “the power of democratic majorities” [O’Sullivan 2014].

Conclusion

It is possible, based on this brief study, to make three tentative findings. First, American post-liberals are a relatively diverse group, but share important features in common. Most of the American post-liberals who have visited Hungary or claimed inspiration from Viktor Orbán possess different reasons for rejecting liberalism, and different ideas about what a post-liberal society might look like. In addition, some also believe that the foundations of liberalism are problematic and make a kind of ‘false god’ out of liberty, and in doing so encourage behaviour antithetical to the common good. What they share in common, however, is a belief that the politically and religiously neutral liberal democratic state is collapsing, that future Western governments will therefore be illiberal, and this being so that state institutions and corporations will either be dominated by ‘woke’ progressives or social conservatives.

Having made this judgement, post-liberals believe that in order for ‘traditional’ – as they understand them – values and identities to remain salient, social conservatives must dominate public institutions and push progressives out of public life where possible. Indeed, they believe that progressive domination of Western institutions and corporations will cause not merely the exclusion of traditionalist conservatives from public life but precipitate the extinction of Western civilization. American post-liberals share with Orbán a professed belief that the West is experiencing a civilizational crisis, in which its traditional Christian values and beliefs about gender and sexuality are being overturned by progressives. All oppose, in a similar way, ‘woke capitalism’ – or the way progressives have used positions in management within corporations to further the broader progressive social agenda – and appear to believe that small government ‘liberal’ conservatism permitted the growth of progressive power and the capture of corporations and the state by progressive activists. There is division between conservatives, however, over the

question of whether liberals encourage or permit the replacing of the majority white population of Western nations with non-white immigrants, a deeply taboo notion often associated with anti-Semitic neo-Nazi movements.

Second, although post-liberal Americans have made efforts to create links with the Orbán government and to study his apparent successes in transforming Hungary into a post-liberal ‘Christian democracy’, American post-liberals appear to possess little knowledge of Hungarian culture and society and are not attempting to replicate Orbán’s rule in the United States. In Viktor Orbán, then, American post-liberals see a politician who has done what a generation of American right-wing politicians could not do: stop the progressive ‘march through the institutions’. Orbán, beyond any other contemporary politician, seems to act as an inspiration for American post-liberals, as both the 2021 visit of a number of prominent political commentators to Hungary, the decision to hold the May 2022 CPAC conference in Budapest, and to invite Orbán to speak at the subsequent August 4, 2022 CPAC conference in Dallas, Texas demonstrates [CPAC 2022].

However, we should be careful not to overstate Orbán’s influence over American post-liberals. American post-liberals often admit they do not know much about Hungarian politics and society – often due to a language and cultural barrier – and at times acknowledge misgivings about Orbán’s anti-democratic tactics. For example, post-liberals praise Hungary’s support for the family and traditional values yet are puzzled by the country’s relatively liberal abortion laws and support for abortion internationally. When, in September 2022, Hungary and Poland sponsored a UN resolution which, among other things, called for “safe abortion where such services are permitted by national law” [United Nations Digital Library 2022], Rod Dreher responded by saying that he didn’t “understand this” but that there “might be a reasonable explanation” [ACI Africa 2022]. However, he also added, “even if this vote is unjustifiable, we Americans must not lose track of how strong both governments have been on these issues — Poland more than Hungary on abortion, because abortion rights are, sadly, popular in Hungary, limiting what the government can do,” Dreher explained [ACI Africa 2022].

Furthermore, Orbán caused some trouble for his American post-liberal right allies when and the post-liberal right when, shortly before arriving in Dallas, he was reported in the American press as having spoken against the creation of ‘mixed race’ nations [The New York Times 2022]. This was a particular problem for the post-liberal right, which encompasses people of varying ethnicities including

Iranian born Sohrab Ahmari, and who are married – in the case of Christopher Rufo – to a non-white person. On the other hand, Orbán’s appearance at CPAC was, according to the New York Times [2022], well received by attendees.

One reason for this was that Orbán’s Dallas speech sought to unite his political agenda with the political agenda of the Republican Party, and especially with the agenda of the post-liberals within the Republican Party. For example, in his speech to CPAC attendees Orbán attacked the Democratic Party and President Obama, calling them globalists who sought to attack the “Christian and national values” that Orbán said were inherent in the Fundamental Law of Hungary [Website of the Hungarian Government 2022]. He also claimed that he, Orbán, was fighting the same enemies as his Republican allies – Brussels and Washington – and further claimed that “these two locations will define the two fronts in the battle being fought for western civilization”.

This suggests that Orbán perceives himself and the American post-liberal right to be fighting not merely a battle for their respective nations, but a battle for Western civilization itself, a civilization which he defines as being ‘Judeo-Christian’ in nature. The positive reception Orbán received, moreover, suggests that the post-liberal right in America was receptive to this conception of a civilization battle for the future of Western Civilization, and to the notion that liberalism was – perhaps even more than Islam – the key enemy against which post-liberals must struggle.

Despite their differences, what the American post-liberal right draw most from Hungary is a real-life example of a successful post-liberal regime which has disavowed globalism, liberalism, and small government, and increased its electoral success by using the power of the state to dominate the public sphere. Equally, they draw inspiration from Orbán apparent success in promoting family friendly policies which encourage Hungarians to have more children, thus preventing the ‘great replacement’ feared by post-liberals. Nowhere do any of the American post-liberals argue that Orbán’s exact model of rule should be imposed on the United States. Rather, they see his political success as an example of the power social conservatives can gain from abandoning liberal ideals of a neutral state, and instead using state power to re-capture key institutions from the left, including the universities and judiciary, and use this power to promulgate ‘traditional’ values throughout society. Indeed, in DeSantis’ legislation against the teaching of Critical Race Theory, which culminated in the “Stop WOKE act”, in American schools, there is a tacit understanding that liberal arguments in favour of free speech and

open discourse are no longer successful in preventing the advance of progressive social justice policies, and that a stronger, Orbán style post-liberal campaign to limit progressive speech is necessary if conservatives are to win the broader culture wars and save Western civilization.

Equally, elements of Orbán's populism are shared with the American post-liberals. For example, both portray the progressive left as an elite class of highly educated, deracinated 'global citizens', who work in bureaucracies or as managers within multinational corporations, and who are unconcerned with the plight of the working class and hostile to the nation-state and the concept of national borders. Both, too, portray themselves as acting in accordance with the interests of the majority population and against the narrow interests of woke corporations and their progressive allies. Moreover, both frame progressives as anti-democratic, and claim that their march through the institutions has made Western society 'liberal' but not democratic. Therefore, both Orbán and American post-liberals portray themselves as champions of true democracy, which is unhindered by the increasingly progressive judiciary and state bureaucracy, but rather acts in accordance with the interests of 'the people' and the common good.

Finally, post-liberalism is a growing force, which appears to be entering the political mainstream in the United States. Orbán's post-liberalism incorporates a populist idea of democracy which may prove popular in the United States, but also involves an attempt to create a conservative version of liberal hegemony, by using many of the same tools – think tanks, NGOs, state power – to push progressives out of public life and fill the space with conservatives and conservative ideas. It is difficult to imagine American conservatives replicating Orbán's success in capturing state and private institutions in such a large and diverse nation, and conservatives themselves are unlikely to believe such a 'victory' is possible and may have more modest goals.

However, post-liberals in America, a movement supported by some of America's most prominent television and print media commentators, and whose candidates for office have been funded on at least two occasions by Peter Thiel, is now starting to alter the ideological orientation of the Republican Party. Post-liberals such as J.D. Vance, Josh Hawley, and Blake Masters have all won Republican nominations, and the success of Ron DeSantis in Florida has led to many commentators anointing him as Trump's successor as the next Republican nominee for President of the United States. As more post-liberals begin to win nominations and, at times, win

seats in Congress and the Senate, or win gubernatorial elections, it will become increasingly difficult for moderate republicans and the party itself to hold onto its liberal ideals. At the same time, the success of post-liberal political candidates will likely spur more Republican politicians and conservative activists to take a similar approach to politics. And it may be that a conservative movement conscious of the power of the state and willing to use state power to dominate public institutions, and punish corporations that publicly support progressive causes, will prove more successful at defending 'traditional' values and ways of life than the small government conservative movements that traditionalist conservatives believe have consistently ceded power to the progressive left for decades. Moreover, it is important to observe that conservatives are increasingly interested in emulating not merely the post-liberal populism of Orbán, but what they perceive to be the anti-democratic tactics of the progressive left, and therefore wish to gain increasing control over education and over the behaviour of corporations to reshape American society.

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