

Authoritarian and neoliberal attacks on higher education in Hungary

Céline Cantat and Pınar E. Dönmez

In April 2017, a law adopted by the Hungarian authorities, and promptly nicknamed ‘Lex CEU’, made the operation of the Central European University (CEU) impossible. The CEU is an English language graduate university with accreditation both in Hungary and in the USA, which was based in Budapest from 1991. Following a long process of attempted negotiations on the part of the university’s management, the decision was eventually taken in January 2018 to move the institution across the Austrian border, to Vienna, where it started some educational activities in Autumn 2019. By the start of the present academic year, virtually all of CEU’s teaching activities and most of its research had been moved, leaving behind only a few units whose workers operate at a distance, and a newly created ‘Democracy Institute’, hosting some of the researchers the university had not taken with it to Vienna and presented as a moral and political legacy of CEU in Hungary.

CEU’s displacement received much attention as the only university to have been expelled from a European country. The story of the confrontation between the institution and the Hungarian authorities was essentially told as one of violation of academic freedom and freedom of expression. Indeed, the attacks against the university took place in the broader context of an authoritarian shift in the country, targeting both a range of social groups seen as deviant and undesirable (migrants, of course, but also the Roma, LGBTQI+, homeless and unemployed people, among others) and the production of critical knowledge, with the abolition of gender studies as a certified discipline and the harassment of various critical scholars working on issues related to migration, race, sex and sexuality. In this sense, the evacuation of CEU was seen as the apex of the repressive politics of the ultraconservative party in power, Fidesz, and its strongman and Hungary’s Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán.

While there certainly is a lot of truth to this account, it tends to isolate CEU’s move to Austria from the politics of education that have emerged in Hungary over the last few decades, which are underpinned by a broader transformation of social relations in the country. It does so in at least two ways. First, the emphasis that was placed on CEU had a tendency to invisibilise struggles happening in other institutions, particularly in Hungarian public higher education. Most notably perhaps, while publicity was given to CEU’s President and Rector, former Canadian politician Michael Ignatieff, in order to expose the plight of his institution and call on international solidarity, much less was said about the dismantling of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the pressure exercised over its members engaged in critical research and teaching. Second, the discourse on academic freedom has largely ignored structural transformation of higher education regimes, and in particular the changing conditions of academic labouring and knowledge production within CEU itself. This article argues that the story of CEU and the politics of education that it entails cannot be understood outside a critical analysis of the neoliberal restructuring of education.¹

After presenting a short timeline of the adoption of ‘Lex CEU’ and the series of events that eventually led to the departure of the university from Hungary, we suggest that relocating the attacks against CEU within a broader assessment of the politics of higher education in Hungary is a useful entry point to complexify and destabilise the dominant discourses of academic freedom that were deployed to support the university. In turn, we examine the way in which such discourses concealed both structural hierarchies in Hungarian higher education and important evolutions within CEU, notably an ongoing process of marketisation and neoliberalisation.

Illiberal democracy, technocratic politics and the control of higher education

On 10 April 2017, the President of the Republic of Hungary signed a set of amendments to Hungary's national higher education law that effectively rendered impossible the operation of CEU in the country. The adoption of the law was accompanied by attacks on the university in pro-government media outlets, which routinely referred to it as 'Soros University' in reference to its founder and main benefactor George Soros. CEU's Gender Studies department and its newly running Open Learning Initiative unit (OLive), which provided study programmes to refugee students – and in which both authors of this article were involved at the time and in subsequent years – were recurrent targets of these attacks.²

The authorities' rhetoric around CEU and Soros was underpinned by a range of mutually reinforcing narratives. Most notably, it brought Islamophobic and anti-migrant discourses, which had gained currency in the country since 2015 and were premised on the identification of new figures of 'external enemies', together with long-standing tropes of the 'enemies within', drawing on historic antisemitic and anti-Roma politics.³ Fidesz's positioning in regard to antisemitism is worth highlighting; the party in power simultaneously invoked an antisemitic imaginary, most notably perhaps in its 2017 anti-immigration campaign,⁴ while pretending to distance itself from antisemitism in order to sideline and discredit the main opposition party, the overtly antisemitic Jobbik.⁵ The coupling of a nationalist, racist and xenophobic political agenda and of revanchist, capitalist social and economic policies has led scholars to draw parallels between Orbán and Hungary's interwar leader and close ally of Hitler, Miklós Horthy.⁶

Against this backdrop, the attacks against CEU were immediately relayed to the international media. Its President and Rector, Michael Ignatieff, became the visible face of a larger campaign condemning Hungary for its breach of academic freedom and its weakening of free speech. Presented in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as attempting to save a last bastion of 'Europe's multicultural, tolerant liberalism', the fight of CEU against the Hungarian authorities attracted widespread support under the rubric #aCEUvalvagyok

(#IstandwithCEU) and was turned into a symbol of enlightened resistance to authoritarianism. Mayors from a range of cities across Eastern Europe broadcast open invitations for the institution to relocate to their municipality,⁷ while within Hungary, a wave of support emerged, bringing together tens of thousands for solidarity protests in Budapest.

Throughout the controversy that followed, the official position of the Hungarian government, as repeatedly conveyed by Orbán, was that the reasons for targeting CEU were purely legal. The institution, he claimed, was involved in regulatory infringements which it needed to redress if it wanted to remain operative. Yet even as the university adjusted its institutional structures in order to comply with new requirements over the following years (opening a campus in the US state of New York, among other things), the government refused to sign an agreement allowing it to continue teaching its US-accredited programmes in Hungary. The ways in which Hungarian authorities have pushed an openly racist, capitalist and heteropatriarchal agenda under the depoliticising guise of administrative and technocratic reforms in certain areas,⁸ coupled with the imposition of direct executive control in several other policy areas are well-documented.⁹ Indeed, the declaration in January 2017 by governing party Fidesz' vice chairman, Szilárd Németh, that Soros-funded organisations had to be 'swept out of Hungary' serves as a clear indicator of the highly political nature of the move against CEU.¹⁰

The fact that the media attacks that accompanied the adoption of 'Lex CEU' focused on initiatives within the institution that denounced gender inequality and advocated for LGBTQI+ and refugees' rights was not coincidental. It rather reflects the broader project of an illiberal democracy dear to Orbán and which he has described as a way to make the state more competitive and efficient, notably by erasing the obstructive activities of NGOs, civil society groups and critical scholars.¹¹ With a two-thirds majority in Parliament since its victory in the 2010 general election, Fidesz has been working to operationalise this vision through sweeping reforms in several sectors.¹² The Hungarian Constitution now begins with a statement that highlights the 'role of Christianity in preserving nationhood',¹³ and has adopted Cardinal laws (which can only be changed by a two-thirds majority) that define marriage as the union 'of a man and a wo-

man'.¹⁴ In October 2018, a government decree signed by Orbán removed gender studies from the list of approved master's degrees in the country, effectively ending all related programmes.¹⁵

In this sense, governmental attacks against CEU must be understood within the broader context of an increasingly authoritarian practice of state power, in which organisations involved in rights-based advocacy or critical education have been portrayed and interpellated as traitorous to the national project. Indeed, while much attention was paid to the situation of CEU, in ways that reproduced a distinction between a backward and illiberal East and a progressive and modern West, attacks waged against other higher education institutions and critical researchers in the country attracted much less support. These politics of differentiated (in)visibility are all the more disturbing when we consider that the possibility enacted by CEU to move to and continue its operation in another country – while of course a testimony to the violence of the state and its attacks against higher edu-

cation – remains a privilege inaccessible to Hungarian public institutions.

A year after the adoption of 'Lex CEU', in June 2018, the Hungarian government adopted changes to its research funding system that put a newly formed Ministry for Innovation and Technology (headed by a close ally of Orbán) in charge of decisions over public research funding. In particular, the new law has meant that funding going to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the oldest public research institution in the country, would effectively be overseen by the new Ministry. Here as well, the official line was that the logic behind the law was efficiency regarding research funding allocation and management. Yet, a few days following the law proposal, an article published in pro-government outlet *Figyelő* and titled 'Immigration, homosexual rights and gender theory: these are the topics which occupy the researchers of the Academy', targeted a range of researchers in the Academy's Centre for Social Sciences as politically suspicious and suggested that the government would now



perform greater oversight of their work. In August 2018, a plan to restructure the Academy, introduced by the new Ministry, introduced increased centralisation and further government control over the institution, primarily by abolishing core funding and replacing it exclusively with tender-based financing through thematic focus areas selected by the government.¹⁶

State attacks on public higher education and research via the control of funding has continued since. After testing the model on the Corvinus University of Budapest, virtually all major public universities have by now been restructured through the setting up of private foundations whose boards of trustees, typically headed by Fidesz loyalists, oversee the funds and budgets of the institutions. Attempts at imposing the new model on the Theatre and Film University (SzFE) led to a series of violent confrontations between the university community and the authorities at the start of the 2020-21 academic year. The restructuring of SzFE must also be understood as an attempt by Fidesz to gain control over a key strategic area for its ultraconservative national project – that of cultural production. In the same vein, the government has made plans to move one of Hungary's main teacher training institutions, the Eszterházy Károly University of Applied Sciences in Eger, under the supervision of the church.¹⁷

These attacks are in fact part of a long-standing assault by Fidesz against public higher education: as early as 2011, a law introducing draconian reforms and threatening academic freedom and institutional autonomy had set off a strong wave of protests and bottom-up organising of university communities across the country.¹⁸ Yet, attacks on research and higher education, including via the restructuring of public funding, have been all together absent from the international discourse on academic freedom that developed around Hungary and that centred almost exclusively on the evacuation of CEU from the country.

The limits of (neo-)liberal academic freedom

In order to unravel the complex layering of inequalities, hierarchies and struggles that were rendered invisible through the dominant discourse, it is necessary to think beyond (neo)liberal notions of academic freedom

that disconnect its politics from the material conditions that are needed for genuinely free teaching, learning and knowledge production.¹⁹

Adopting an expansive reading of academic freedom allows us to challenge the contours of capitalist enclosures and recolonisation of the university.²⁰ In the case of Hungary, it pushes us to examine at least three scales of inequality that become muted in mainstream and hegemonic narratives on higher education: first, the positioning of Hungary in global hierarchies and corresponding hegemonic East/West narratives, which we have touched upon above by contrasting the international response to attacks against CEU, perceived as a primarily US university, *versus* those on local public institutions; second, the social and economic inequalities prevalent within Hungarian society and in public (higher) education; and third, internal hierarchies and resulting invisibility within CEU itself.²¹

With respect to the second and third dimensions, the myopic perspective of a (neo)liberal conception of academic freedom tends to sideline the unequal characteristics of knowledge production and of teaching and learning activities, both in relation to the Hungarian public (higher) education system as well as within CEU. As a private, US-accredited institution, CEU has increasingly been shaped by its embeddedness within a global trend towards commodification and privatisation of higher education, on the one hand, and precarisation and casualisation of academic labour, on the other.²² Indeed, the very establishment of CEU and other private universities in Hungary (and more broadly in Central and Eastern Europe) was decisively made possible by structural transformations in the Hungarian HE context from the early 1990s onwards.²³

Moreover, the institutional nature of CEU and its positioning at the heart of the East/West hierarchies outlined above, have perpetuated the conventional view that *all* its faculty, staff and students benefited from its prestige and privilege in material and symbolic ways. This perception of a homogeneous community, characterised by widespread advantages, contributed to invisibilising a range of hierarchies and inequalities within the institution and diminished the possibilities for greater solidarity with higher education workers outside CEU in the public sector.²⁴ In particular, the processes of casualisation and fragmentation of academic labour introduced and en-

trenched new hierarchies and divergent positions within the academic, administrative and subcontracted workforce, which could also be contrasted with those existing within senior university management. The articulation of these positionalities across class, race and gender axes have not been fully acknowledged. The lack of consideration, for instance, of the dramatic rise in problems faced by non-EU university workers and students in securing visa and residence permits after CEU's departure from Hungary to Austria, reflects the intensification of global, national and institutional asymmetries and inequalities.²⁵ At the same time, the limited acknowledgment of this problem indirectly strengthened the hegemonic governmental narrative by distancing CEU (imagined as a homogeneous block) from the broader society and university communities within public institutions and by overshadowing their shared interests in access to free education, decent and stable work and pay, and intellectual freedom. Another contributing factor to this distancing process has been the relative absence of active solidarity from CEU towards Hungarian public HE institutions in the context of the repeated governmental attacks mentioned above. While solidarity-building improved considerably in the post-2017 period, when the governmental attacks intensified and spread further into several public universities and degree programmes as well as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, long-entrenched structural hierarchies impacted negatively on the formation of strong bridges between these university communities.

Crisis and the neoliberal restructuring of CEU

Meanwhile, within CEU, senior management's insistence that it was the sole appropriate authority to represent the institution and to respond to governmental attacks yielded a defensive posture, which contributed to the relegation of several crucial matters to a hypothetical future, when the existential crisis triggered by Lex CEU would be overcome.²⁶ The cultivation of highly individualised, atomised, yet hierarchised neoliberal subjectivities in the global university,²⁷ coupled with persistent governmental attacks, thus triggered a set of specific and noteworthy trends.

First, it produced significant challenges for attempts to address a range of concerns in a collective fashion. Aca-

demical workers in neoliberal universities often find themselves in a double bind. On the one hand, their labour is increasingly subject to casualisation and devaluation – notably characterised by the deterioration of *actual* working conditions – while being pitted against one another in the highly competitive higher education environments fuelled and maintained by alienated academic labour.²⁸ On the other hand, the alleged prestige and privilege attributed to HEIs and to the products of academic work, as well as the commonly held view that job security is attainable following a period of stoic endurance and perseverance through precarity, often keep many early career scholars, PhD students, and others on insecure contracts and feeling perpetually disempowered.²⁹

The hierarchies and marginalisations are further entrenched (and at times weaponised) through uneven, gendered and racialised regimes of care.³⁰ As teachers and academic supervisors in OLIVE – a set of education initiatives for students who had experienced displacement initially formed in a grassroots fashion but which became a CEU unit in 2016 – our experience was shaped in specific ways by such regimes, both because our own institutional positions were made unstable due to the precarity of our unit (which relied in large part on external funds), and because our students tended to be relegated to the margins through disqualifying and exclusionary administrative and/or pedagogical processes.³¹

Moreover, in such an environment, which elevates and prioritises the interests of the abstract individual as its *modus operandi*, attempts at collective claim-making are forced to wage a double-struggle: against the liberal individualistic paradigm that continuously (mis)represents shared grievances and concerns as intending to advance particular interests of individuals/groups *vis-à-vis* the general interest of the university community; and against the existing conditions of precarity and alienation that perpetuate a chronic sense of anxiety and worry about everyday subsistence and the possibilities of meaningful, sustainable work.³² The subsuming of the collective university voice within that of its President/Rector, as noted earlier, reinforced these internal dynamics, perhaps partly unintentionally, thus sustaining the politics of invisibility that played out at the global and national scales.

A striking manifestation of the intersection between neoliberal politics and authoritarian attacks can be found

in the 2018 suspension of the OLIVE programmes and of the European Commission-funded research project on migration solidarity.⁵³ The authoritarian legal backdrop was a series of laws, evocatively labelled the ‘Stop Soros’ package, rushed through the parliament by the Hungarian government over the course of 2018 and which targeted civil society organisations in the field of migration and actions putatively pertaining to the nebulous notion of ‘migration propaganda’. The instrument of repression that led to the suspensions, on the other hand, was economic as it manifested in the form of a tax on the budgets of the organisations whose primary funding source originated from outside Hungary.⁵⁴ Even though the legality and constitutionality of the legislation were the subject of much controversy, and were eventually declared in violation of European legislation by the European Court of Justice in 2021, the risk of enforcement proved sufficient to close down projects on migration at CEU.⁵⁵ Indeed, the question of who can exercise their right to practice academic freedom gains a whole new meaning from the vantage point of those whose education programmes and research were interrupted and suspended in this period.

In turn, CEU’s move to Vienna, against the backdrop of governmental attacks on the institution, accelerated and justified an ongoing internal restructuring process and provided new openings for it. While the seeds of these structural transformations were planted prior to the crisis inaugurated in 2017, it acted as a catalyst to bring them to completion. It also worked as a means to stifle the articulation of a collective, internal critique by the university faculty, staff and students. A concrete manifestation of how these dynamics have impacted the livelihoods of university community members is the limited financial support and scholarships extended to students who cannot otherwise self-fund their studies, accommodation and living expenses in Vienna following the institutional move. This testifies to the evolution of what has been called the student funding model of CEU, which has evolved from a system where virtually every student received a full scholarship when the university opened in the early 1990s to one where most now have to pay tuition fees. Referring to this process as pertaining to CEU’s ‘changing funding model’ is in itself a discursive strategy that localises a broader structural pattern and erases its connection to the global project of neo-

liberalising the university. While it may be thought that any support is still better than no support at all, this reorganisation privileges the enrolment of fee-paying students who have the necessary financial means to fund their studies. This indeed constitutes a sharp move away from CEU’s historic student population, which has included many from disadvantaged backgrounds within and beyond Central East Europe. It is evident, therefore, that the impact of this process will be (and is already) felt drastically by those students whose access to funded graduate study has become limited and that this is ultimately transforming the overall spirit and ethos of the university.⁵⁶

Critical contextualisation

We have attempted above to critically reflect on a widely publicised case of direct governmental attacks against a higher education institution in Europe. While fully acknowledging the catastrophic impact of the authoritarian turn in Hungarian politics, we have argued that dominant discourses around the eviction of CEU need more critical contextualisation. In particular, such discourses tend to isolate the plight of CEU from broader processes unfolding within higher education, locally and globally. Exceptionalising CEU makes it difficult to carry out an analysis in relation to what has happened and keeps happening to other academic institutions in Hungary and to universities elsewhere. In contrast, we believe that placing more emphasis on the broader social and political dynamics within which attacks against CEU were embedded allows us to understand better not just the events in themselves, but also the contemporary politics of higher education in the country and beyond.

For this purpose, we have attempted to shed light on a set of social and political layers that tend to go unmentioned in mainstream accounts – namely, the inscription of the CEU events within East/West hierarchies, their relationship with longstanding attacks on Hungarian public higher education, and the way they impacted on the rights and conditions of university workers and students within CEU. This rethinking of the politics of higher education in Hungary from the margins of a neoliberalising university is a call for recentring structurally muted voices and accounting for the diverse constituencies that make up university communities. It

is thus part of broader efforts at rethinking the role of universities and academics ‘as critic and conscience of society’.³⁷ We believe that this reflexive exercise is a necessary first step towards building further resistance to the acute sense of alienation and anxiety prevalent across academia in neoliberal and authoritarian times.³⁸

Céline Cantat works at the Paris School of International Affairs, where her research focuses on migration, humanitarianism and solidarity. Pinar E. Dönmez works at De Montfort University, where her research focuses on the (de)politicisation of governance and social processes from a critical political economy perspective.

Notes

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