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THE MEME RADAR: Locating Liberalism in Illiberal Hungary

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After a turbulent election period marked by widespread state propaganda campaigns, Johanna and Artúr, two final-year students at a liberal elite high school in Budapest, embarked on an unusual way of preparing for their Hungarian history exams. Instead of comparing notes and questioning each other on assigned topics, Johanna and Artúr chatted on the mobile phone application Facebook Messenger. While browsing through photos of the memorable events of their final year, they spotted a photograph from their prom night that resembled "Distracted Boyfriend," one of the most popular internet memes of the late 2010s (Figure 1). This meme consists of a stock photograph of a woman upset with her partner who, while still holding her hand, ignores her and looks lasciviously at a woman passing by (Soh 2020, 1122). In the students' version, however, the setup occurs at their prom: Artúr is holding the hand of his dance partner but looking at a girl behind him.

The students proceeded to make no less than fifty variations on this popular meme, which works with captions to highlight the moral imperative that the boyfriend should have stayed loyal to his partner. The students' versions incorporated

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captions on themes from their history class. One of the memes, for instance, suggested that instead of appointing a fascist as the prime minister during World War II, Hungary's wartime leader Miklós Horthy should have condemned anti-Semitism. Johanna and Artúr also went on to produce memes on contemporary issues: another meme portrayed how instead of turning financier George Soros into a public enemy, the country's self-proclaimed illiberal prime minister Viktor Orbán should be fixing Hungary's problems (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Empty template for the widely popular "Distracted Boyfriend" meme.

These exam preparations took place in 2018, at the peak of a moment of liberal decline that vernacular and journalistic discourses commonly came to refer to as a "post-truth" era. Postulating an erosion of authoritative standards for separating fact from fiction by the twin forces of populist politicians and social media algorithms, post-truth discourse has been challenged by anthropologists who point out that an age of simple truths (Mair 2017) never existed. Having lived in Hungary for the better part of the 2010s, we saw our analytical doubts about post-truth often surpassed by the rapid pace at which fictitious truth-claims materialized all around us. The students' meme on the political situation was inspired by the giant billboards and posters suggesting that the Hungarian-born American financier and philanthropist George Soros controlled the European Union (Langer 2021). These adverts formed part of a propaganda campaign on what the government called the Soros Plan—a conspiratorial idea that Soros, who is Jewish, and

Figure 2. Variation on "Distracted Boyfriend" meme created in a Facebook Messenger chat by Johanna and Artúr. Artúr (in the photo) represents Viktor Orbán who chooses "Turning into a public enemy the kind uncle who paid your tuition fees" over "Solving the country's problems." The kind uncle here refers to financier George Soros, who funded Orbán's studies at Oxford University in the 1980s as well as much of the tuition fees and study grants for students at Budapest's liberal-cosmopolitan Central European University.

his liberal shadow empire (*háttérhatalom*) plan to destroy European nation-states by bringing in one million illegal migrants per year.[1]

At the time, the notion of post-truth was often mentioned in the same breath as the concept of the "alt-right," which popularized far-right ideology to youth via social media platforms, and, above all, internet memes (Tuters 2018). In Hungary in the late 2010s, however, political memes were not the prerogative of the far-right, which controlled both the government and public media, but rather of the oppositional minority that identified with liberalism. Indeed, while some material and interpersonal links existed between the Trump administration and the Orbán regime, exemplified by Steve Bannon's visits and consultancy work in Budapest,

the two countries' media constellations could hardly have differed more. Whereas in the United States, broadcast and print media remained open to liberal voices under Trump (cf. Boyer and Yurchak 2010), the Hungarian government's capture of the media meant that print and broadcast outlets increasingly came to spread the same far-right conspiracies also propagated through omnipresent billboard campaigns.

Figure 3. "We will not let Soros have the last laugh" billboards promoting the results of the spring 2017 National Consultation on migration. Photo by Balázs Turay.

In this article, we examine how youth in Budapest deliberate the meanings of truth and liberalism under an increasingly authoritarian regime that makes extensive use of propaganda campaigns while explicitly branding itself as *illiberal*. We explore the vernacular meanings of illiberalism as well as the forking pathways of liberalism among high school students, their parents, and ourselves as former residents of Budapest. We do this by tracing the workings and politics of the countless internet memes that emerge incessantly in response to the Hungarian state's propaganda campaigns. We seek to understand why it is that in this postsocialist context of entrenching authoritarianism, young urbanites who identify as liberals

increasingly frame, perceive, and understand everyday situations as memes. We do so by conceptualizing how certain detachable visual and discursive elements of state propaganda, through the mediation of memetic parody, become resources for positioning the self in everyday interaction (Spitulnik 1996). Exploring the everyday negotiation of generational differences, class antagonisms, and rural-urban divisions, we argue that a liberalism deliberated in the language of internet memes for these youth has become part of their embodied dispositions as they increasingly perceive their surroundings through the genres and sensibilities of meme culture—even when no technological devices are present.

Our argument unfolds over the course of five sections. First, we introduce Hungary's meme culture in the context of Viktor Orbán's attempts to establish an electoral authoritarian state through the means of institutional, economic, and cultural control. Second, drawing on Annastiina's fieldwork in an elite high school in the Hungarian capital, we outline how both illiberalism and communism figure as anchor points of alterity for its students as they face increasingly ubiquitous propaganda. Third, we conceptualize how memetic parodies of illiberalism become part of the embodied dispositions of young urbanites in Budapest—navigating truth claims and locating themselves through a sensibility that we refer to as the "meme radar." Fourth, we trace how this meme culture revolves around values and identity instead of around the material underpinnings of authoritarian consolidation in today's Hungary. Lastly, we examine what the prominence of memes reveals about the everyday workings and limitations of liberalism as a political constellation in a context of ubiquitous government propaganda.

ILLIBERAL MEMES IN THE LIBERAL MILIEU

As in other postsocialist countries, the decade after the end of state socialism in Hungary saw widespread hopes among liberals for an open marketplace of ideas that they saw as a key promise of building capitalism and democracy after communism. Viktor Orbán himself was famously a key figure of the liberal opposition with his party Fidesz, "The Alliance of Young Democrats," founded in 1988. After the regime change, the previously governing Communist Party evolved into the Hungarian Socialist Party, which in coalition with a liberal party practiced harsh austerity politics throughout the 1990s. Following a decade of economic decline and cuts in welfare, Fidesz began to reposition itself as the main alternative to what it portrayed as the joint forces of liberalism and communism as continued in the Socialist Party. In the worldview of Fidesz, socialist and liberal rule was characterized not only by corrupt politicians but also by an erosion of traditional

values. Communism, in the view of Fidesz, would never truly come to an end as long as such a coalition remained in power.

Fidesz appeals both to voters disillusioned by capitalism *and* to an entrepreneurial segment of society wary of anything with communist-turned-socialist connotations. Following the poor management of the 2008 financial crisis and political scandals among the socialists, Fidesz gained a two-third majority victory in the 2010 parliamentary election. With complete control over legislation, Fidesz immediately began to implement its political program, referred to as the System of National Cooperation, which aims to transform the entirety of Hungarian society. Changes such as a repeatedly rewritten constitution and a gerrymandered electoral system, as well the entanglement of politics and rule by oligarchs, have supported the centralization of economic, institutional, and cultural control in the hands of the party.

The regime's discourse, however, suggests that the party builds a fairer society for all through its heroic battles against liberalism. In his annual speech in Băile Tuşnad, Romania, in 2014, Prime Minister Orbán famously elaborated his intention to build an illiberal alternative to Western-type liberal democracy: an *illiberal democracy*. He cited the examples of Singapore, China, Russia, and Turkey as countries that are economically successful without being liberal or even democratic. In practice, Fidesz combines conservative social politics with eccentric economic policies, ones characterized by some scholars as markedly neoliberal (Fabry 2019; Scheiring and Szombati 2020). The economy's restructuring along the lines of oligarchic patron-client networks has led to the rapid enrichment of Orbán's family members and allies, often with EU funds (Scheiring 2018; Bohle and Greskovits 2019). The closure of opposition newspapers such as *Népszabadság* (*People's Liberty*) has made independent journalism retreat online, while TV channels and newspapers have become mostly regime-controlled (Bajomi-Lázár 2013; Bátorfy and Urbán 2020). In spring 2017, Fidesz published planned legislation that would make the work of the liberal-cosmopolitan Central European University illegal, creating a wave of demonstrations and an international outcry. After a convoluted legislative process and failed negotiations, the university saw its license to issue U.S. diplomas threatened and was forced to relocate to Vienna (Nadkarni 2018; Monterescu 2019).[2]

The decreasing space for free deliberation in Hungary's broadcast and print media and the centralized dissemination of state propaganda on television, radio, newspapers, billboards, and leaflets indicate a shift in discourse familiar from the anthropology of late socialism (Yurchak 2005). In contexts where discourse

becomes strongly centralized and homogenized, as Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak (2010, 184) have argued, language undergoes a performative shift in which "literal criticism becomes strangely predictable and ineffective next to the parodic possibilities of inhabiting the norm"—a phenomenon they refer to as "hypernormalisation."[3] Comparing late socialist parody in the Soviet Union with comedy shows in the United States during what they call late liberalism, Boyer and Yurchak diagnosed a similar standardization of form in the news and media culture of the capitalist West. They attribute these parallels with the homogeneity of discourse under state socialism in Eastern Europe to the present-day centralization and digital transferability of news and media content production, the temporality of real-time news-making, and the "transformation of late-liberal politics into a kind of professional performance culture" (Boyer and Yurchak 2010, 208).

Postsocialist political memes in the 2010s share much with socialist jokes from the 1970s and 1980s, which engendered forms of political intimacy between citizens and the state "that cannot be simply classified as resistant or supportive" (Lampland and Nadkarni 2016, 17). For example, in her study of Russian and Ukrainian memes in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, the sociologist Anastasia Denisova (2019, 93) pointed out that a meme incorporating tropes of state propaganda can often be seen as pro- or anti-government depending on the eyes of the beholder. Much like the punch lines of socialist jokes, today's memes work by imitating or feigning allegiance to state doctrines, such as the aforementioned Soros Plan. By combining literal imitation with an intent to mean the very opposite for those who are in the know, the memes circulated by liberal youth in Hungary constitute reflexive forms that generate intimacy by simultaneously pointing toward self and other (Petrović 2018, 204).

The ironic forms of this meme culture are prefigured in the billboard campaigns of the Fidesz government. Both share a static frame and non-narrative form that facilitate an instant literal reading and counter-reading of its content, which inevitably is a play on familiar binaries such as the illiberal and the liberal, the nation and its others, Hungary and Europe. Since 2015, in parallel with the emergence of large-scale counter-propaganda campaigns in the form of parodic billboards (Nagy 2016), a spectacular rise in meme pages has occurred on Facebook and Instagram. These take the standardization of illiberal state propaganda as both their object of critique and as their guiding aesthetic. Specializing in memes that exhibit a playful overidentification with the government's propaganda output, this parodic constellation consists of pages with names such as NERpincér (NER waiter, a pun that combines the name of Orbán's political system with that of a

popular online food delivery service), Értelmiségi Kisnyugdíjas (Pensioner of the Intelligentsia), and, most prominently, Illiberal Memes—the pioneering page that gave its name to the meme genre as a whole.[4]

Figure 4. Profile picture of Illiberal Memes circa 2017, replacing the face of Colonel Sanders in the Kentucky Fried Chicken logo with that of George Soros.

Run by a group of four university students, Illiberal Memes offers a key example of the performative shift from overt critique toward the parodic imitation of the illiberal state. Founded in spring 2017 under an intensification of propaganda campaigns against the European Union and legislation targeting the legality of foreign-funded NGOs and the liberal-cosmopolitan Central European University, the page enjoys wide popularity among high school and university students. Many of its memes are harvested from a Facebook incubator group in which fans and followers can edit existing memes and upload their own content. As the page was founded during a period of mass protests that galvanized many but ultimately proved ineffective, the page can be seen as a culmination of the process in which youth who identify as liberals took refuge online as a way of coping with the ubiquity of state propaganda.

The parodic imitation of the state is not limited to the visual language (Figure 2) of the page, but can also emerge in the language used by the administrators who run it. For instance, in his 2018 election campaign, Orbán announced: "We are fighting an enemy that is different from us. Not open, but hiding; not straightforward but crafty; not honest but base; not national but international; does not believe in working but speculates with money; does not have its own homeland but

feels it owns the whole world"—a speech denounced by international observers for its obvious anti-Semitic tropes.[5] The founders of Illiberal Memes, by contrast, seek to expose the same paranoid style by imitating it: "Behind our page there stands a small, migrant-friendly minority that . . . serves the interests of none other than the Great Lord George Soros. Thanks to loads of paid likes [referring to the government trope that all opposition is paid by Soros], at present there are already more than 35,000 people following us!"[6]

In their interview given to the oppositional web media site Index.hu, the meme page administrators mention 888.hu and Origo, two notorious pro-government news portals, as their greatest competitors. The pro-government news articles of these sites, the administrators of the page argue, should not be treated as news, but as memes: "They post remarkably fantastic memes every day. We have something to learn from them." At the same time, the editors of Illiberal Memes say that the government media is not good at *deliberately* making memes: "Even we make better memes about the opposition than the regime."

Besides ironic overidentification with the Orbán regime, Illiberal Memes also draws on historical comparisons to unmask the procedures through which illiberal propaganda functions. The page's very first meme (Figure 5) portrays Spider-Man, from the 2002 superhero film of the same name, putting on his glasses. As Spider-Man's vision becomes clear, Orbán is revealed as the communist leader János Kádár who ruled Hungary from the aftermath of the 1956 uprising until 1988. The road to democracy, the image suggests, has proven to be merely a U-turn to the authoritarianism of state socialism.

Through comparisons of the Orbán regime to the communist leadership, Illiberal Memes fans position themselves in opposition to the voters of Fidesz, who they often claim are easily manipulated and not ready for liberal democracy. One of the moderators of the page argues that one purpose of Illiberal Memes is to encourage youth to debate current affairs in a more cultured manner, as opposed to the ad hominem (*személyeskedő*) and cynical style of communication they perceive as dominant in today's Hungary. But this effort to awaken a more transparent and rational style of communication paradoxically echoes the crude aesthetics of the Orbán regime's propaganda campaigns. Indeed, while Illiberal Memes circulates images that portray the Fidesz leadership as communist-era leaders, the Fidesz party itself regularly sponsors Photoshopped portrayals of opposition leaders as part of its election campaigns. To understand this interplay of state socialism, liberalism, and illiberalism, we now turn to the social life of internet memes in a high school in Budapest.

Figure 5. Spider-Man reveals Viktor Orbán to be communist-era ruler János Kádár.

ORBÁN, OBAMA, AND RÁKOSI IN A LIBERAL CLASSROOM

During a break between two classes, final-year students Johanna and Julian proudly informed Annastiina that among several other group chats, they also had an Obama-themed chat. The purpose of this chat was to share stories, pictures, and GIFs of Barack and Michelle Obama: Barack surfing, Michelle smiling, the whole Obama family leisurely spending a day together. For the students, Obama represented a cool president *and* a good father and husband. Julian and Johanna stated that Obama was not only the first black president of the United States; he was also the world's "biggest liberal." Liberal, in this context, stood for a direct opposition to Orbán, whose second and third term as prime minister (2010–2018) nearly coincided with Obama's time as the president of the United States (2009–2017). Growing up with social media intrinsic to their everyday lives, the students had perceived their world as global for as long as they could remember. The mornings of their adolescence began with scrolling the viral news content platform BuzzFeed; their evenings were spent watching late-night shows from the United States on online streaming video platforms, which, following the presidency of Donald Trump, had mostly turned into Trump shows.

Both Johanna and Julian attended István Örkény School, one of numerous Budapest-based elite schools with a widespread, although not complete consensus

against Orbán and his regime. Liberalism and illiberalism effectively constituted each other in the lives of Julian and Johanna: the fact that the regime referred to itself as *illiberal* meant that liberalism reigned in their imagination as the desirable antithesis of the non-democratic status quo. The meaning of liberalism, however, remained diffuse, as the students' ideas were saturated with different nuances, eras, and understandings of liberalism.

Johanna's parents had been well-known figures of the 1980s dissident movement's liberal faction. During the 1980s, a century-old political divide had resurfaced with the division of the pro-democracy movement into large rural ethnopopulist *népi* ("of the people") and smaller but significant liberal *urbánus* (urbanite, cosmopolitan) camps. This divide, which periodically appears in Hungarian public discussion, is recognizable by its distinctive aesthetics, parallel public spheres, and political emphases. It depends on the mutual co-constitution of binaries such as community vs. individual, Hungarians vs. non-Hungarians, countryside vs. capital, Hungarian minorities abroad vs. universal human rights, religion vs. secularism, and so on. Susan Gal (1991, 444) notes how "the debate has often channelled discussion so powerfully that meta-analyses are difficult to construct. Virtually any commentary . . . is sharply contested and pressed into one or the other camp," even though some intellectuals "identified themselves—spontaneously and ironically—as living example of the two traditions in one body" (Gal 1991, 447). This enduring divide came to characterize party politics and public culture well into the 1990s. The exception was the small but fierce anti-communist party Fidesz, which impressed many with its capacity to stay outside of the divide, until the party in the mid-1990s began to address the ethnopopulist faction.

Johanna had grown up attending what she called "sect parties" of the liberal elite, where she sat in the corner reading Harry Potter books while important people debated the future of the country. These family friends represented the liberal intelligentsia, many of whom for most of the 1990s and 2000s had been influential in or even in charge of many cultural and political institutions in Hungary. Johanna often expressed exasperation with the way her father, Imre, considered himself "the liberalest of liberals," but held on to what to her were ideas antithetic to liberalism: patriarchal and even colonial views of the superiority of the West and market economies. Imre's political idol was Margaret Thatcher, and he firmly believed in the superiority of what he called Western European civilization. He proudly stated to his children and to Annastiina that he was "not interested in traveling to India as long as there was a French village he had not yet visited." Johanna perceived these views as outrageous and even racist. *Her* liberalism was

not associated with Western superiority. While Johanna and Imre debated these matters openly and fiercely, their liberalisms also stood as a united front against Orbán's illiberalism.

Typically for a large segment of the Hungarian liberal intelligentsia (*liberális értelmiség)*, the tight-knit community around the school professed high levels of political awareness and cultural capital, even though many families such as those of Johanna and Julian struggled financially to make ends meet. In this sense, these students differed from high school students in other schools in other Hungarian cities, many of whom would come from more financially stable entrepreneurial families and live a far less politically charged life. Very few of the Örkény students had any connections "in the countryside" (*vidék*), to the extent that anything in the countryside was regarded as a bit of a joke, even to those few that proudly presented themselves as the exception to this Budapest cosmopolitan elite.

The meme culture of parodic overidentification was highly visible in school life: stickers on students' lockers showed Fidesz slogans in Cyrillic alphabet as a reference to the Soviet Union, and one classroom had redecorated propaganda leaflets targeting George Soros on the wall. In the sociality of Örkény, group chats, memes, and GIFs were inseparable from face-to-face communication during school hours. To the exasperation of his teachers, Julian in particular had a habit of scrolling his smartphone during class, while Johanna once remarked that "nothing" was happening in the school without "the virtual stuff." Johanna and Julian both keenly followed Illiberal Memes. Although exasperated by the political situation, they found the page a source of consoling hilarity. Or, as Julian once put it: "The country is shit, but the memes are good."

Johanna's and Julian's political awareness was particularly galvanized by the long summer of migration in 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees passed through Hungary (Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram 2016; Kallius 2016). The xenophobic propaganda campaigns that followed shook Johanna's and Julian's conceptions of Hungary's place in the democratic world. Julian in particular felt deeply ashamed of Hungary's abysmal reputation in the Western press, which paid very little attention to Hungarians' opposition to Orbán and often dubbed Eastern Europe "racist" by mere virtue of being Eastern European and having inherited a socialist past (Böröcz 2006; Dzenovska 2017).

In Örkény, as on Illiberal Memes, the present was oftentimes likened to the communist past. Particularly during the higher-level history classes that Johanna and Julian attended, narratives on the past of state socialism and perceptions of present-day illiberalism served as liberalism's antimodern antagonist. When their

teacher, Kati, pointed out that officially the Soviet Union had been called democratic, the students all chuckled and laughed; just like the first elections in Hungary after the communist takeover in 1948 had been "democratic." And wasn't it ironic that it was Viktor Orbán who had for the first time demanded aloud in 1989 that the Soviet troops should leave Hungary—and now he himself had turned authoritarian?

Much like other everyday situations, history lessons about the communist period at Örkény, too, were often seen as source material for the production of new memes. Students would regularly create memes on their smartphones and share them as stories or on group chats. At other times, however, the students' familiarity with meme templates and formulas was enough to make them perceive a situation as an unmaterialized meme. Such was the case, for instance, during a class on the personality cult of the 1950s Stalinist dictator of Hungary, Mátyás Rákosi. In her usual theatrical and eloquent manner, Kati read aloud the birthday speech that Ernő Gerő, another early communist leader, had given on Rákosi's birthday in 1952: "Comrade Rákosi's sixtieth birthday is the heart-warming celebration of our whole nation. But this day is not only the celebration of *our* nation! Our beloved Mátyás Rákosi . . . is known and respected by millions and millions of people in the whole world!"

Julian, Johanna, and their classmates laughed at the speech, and quickly managed to identify the markers of a personality cult in its wording. These included, first, that Rákosi and the party were indistinguishable; second, typical of dictatorial propaganda, Rákosi was claimed to represent "normal" Hungarians; and third, the assertion that Rákosi was internationally known and celebrated. Kati congratulated her laughing students. There was one task left: to analyze a famous propaganda photo from the early 1950s that Kati showed on the PowerPoint, in which Rákosi, dressed in a suit, was gently caressing wheat crops in a soft breeze.

Amid smiles, facepalm expressions, and chuckles, Annastiina already sensed that as they listed elements of propaganda, students were not seeing Rákosi, but Orbán. Soon enough, Johanna whispered: "This is *just* like today." The task brought to mind the video that Orbán had just posted on his Facebook page, in which he cooked an Easter ham meal for his family, pretending to be just like any Hungarian man, wearing an apron and sweeping his porch before cooking.[7] In all of these cases, the meme template of Orbán-as-communist leader served as the frame through which students perceived and made sense of state propaganda forms.

How did these students come to see propaganda through the lens of internet memes? The similarity the students see does not inhere in the images themselves.

Rather, the perceived repetition emerges from a series of past encounters in which these forms are "framed, reflexively, as being the 'same thing, again'" (Gal 2018, 2). The continual creation of memes became a breeding ground for seeing memes as propaganda, and propaganda as memes. As Johanna confirmed, it was enough to merely see the original Stalinist propaganda photo: in the students' minds, Orbán was there, caressing crops. The students' memetic sensibilities ensured that no digital devices were needed to perceive the situation as a meme. In the next section, we explore how memes have become increasingly autonomous from technological devices and part of embodied sensibilities to navigate social positions.

THE MEME RADAR: NAVIGATING ILLIBERAL PROPAGANDA

For Johanna, Julian, and their classmates, the incentive to capture, edit, and share lived moments in the format of memes and social media stories has become second nature (Belting 2012; Miller et al. 2016; Borenstein 2022). Although we are both millennials ourselves, our self-identified Generation Z interlocutors often found it humorous to see how lagging our embodied skills were in terms of the speed of chatting, taking selfies, crafting a smooth series of interconnected Instagram stories, or grasping the full range of intertextual references required to understand the latest memes. For these youth, technological affordances of digital platforms such as scalability, replicability, and shareability have become intimately linked to the sensorium (Papacharissi and Easton 2013). Everyday situations are instantly evaluated as worthy of reaching for one's phone to be captured and circulated for likes and comments or not; whatever is sensed already has the quality of a potential meme or social media story.

For our interlocutors in Budapest, memes are thus only partially content "on the internet," as they do not emphasize the online platforms through which they circulate as a realm separate from the real (cf. Boellstorff 2016). Rather, they perceive the world through what we might call "meme-tinted glasses." The students were incessantly detecting fragments of propaganda and interpreting them as memes. Their identification of aspects of the world as meme-like made for a key way of orienting themselves in moral and political space and constituted a means of navigating between truth and untruth. As scholars reflecting on relations between mobile technologies and affect, habit, and gesture have noted, the instant access to databases and image repositories has for young generations become a form of intuitive engagement that allows them to instantly reframe, remix, and recirculate events as they unfold (Serres 2014; Pedwell 2019). In the context of our field site, we refer to this mediated disposition as a "meme radar," as liberal youth

orient themselves in the world by working through perceived similarities between lived realities and memes.

Anthropologists have long noted that media serve as "reservoirs and reference points" for everyday conversation (Spitulnik 1996, 162), for instance, showing how discursive forms such as radio phrases escape their original contexts and enter vernacular speech. In this sense, the blurring of boundaries between media culture and the everyday is not new. What is different here from the imitation of phrases from the radio or the copying of hashtags onto a placard (see Postill 2014), is how everyday situations such as a prom dance or a history class come to be seen through the lens of memes and are consequently, using digital devices, turned into new memes. The fact that memes have an object-like materiality also makes them distinctive from other parodic cultural forms such as jokes (see Lampland and Nadkarni 2016). Jokes, like memes, are networked in the sense that they can index their path of transmission along networks of social relations as one encounters the same joke multiple times. Unlike jokes, however, memes can be collected, exhibited, and faithfully reproduced (Hogan 2010; Shifman 2014), as well as purposefully transformed into new digital objects to impact the direction of the new instantiations that proliferate (Fisher 2019; Strassler 2020).

To understand why memes have become so central to navigating the tensions between reality and unreality for young Hungarian urbanites, we need to understand better what they are and how they operate. The media scholar Limor Shifman (2014, 41) defines an internet meme as a "group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance . . . created with awareness of each other," a group widely "circulated, imitated and/or transformed." While this provides a useful general definition, an anthropology of memes should acknowledge that what a meme *is* in part has cultural variation and context-dependency (cf. Miller 2011).

In a recent study of political memes in Singapore, Wee Yang Soh (2020) draws on linguistic anthropology to argue that, indeed, context determines what memes are, and their social implications. Crucial here are people's media ideologies, which refers to people's beliefs about media, including what media are experienced by social actors as appropriate for particular purposes in a given context (Gershon 2010). By taking this into account, we can ground the ethnographic analysis of media forms in people's perceptions of communicative possibilities and limitations of particular media channels (Gershon 2010, 283). In Singapore, Soh (2020) shows, media ideologies surrounding memes render their political effect ambiguous: on the one hand, the fact that memes are seen as inconsequential youth

chatter allows people to share them freely in a context of censorship; on the other hand, this "meme ideology" also limits their potential for political mobilization.

Soh's characterization of the potential of political memes seems apt in many contexts, as indeed the media ideology of memes as a trivial visual language of youth is present in Hungary too. What is distinct and perhaps unique about the Hungarian phenomenon of illiberal memes, however, is the local memetic chain of references. For our interlocutors, the polarizing binary tropes and crude visual aesthetics of the government's propaganda billboards resemble global internet meme culture. Combined with the practices of incessantly producing meme variations on propaganda, this establishes a memetic chain in which, for these youth, government propaganda campaigns and parodic memes appear to be always already indexing each other. The ubiquity of these memetic practices is what ensures that in the context of youth who identify as liberal, the world appears as already generating memes that need only slight tweaking to communicate one's position on Hungarian politics.

POTATOES AT THE END OF HISTORY

As we have seen, the illiberal present and the communist past are commonly framed in memes as the evil twins that hinder the successful realization of liberal democracy in Hungary. Yet the structuring opposition between the liberal and the illiberal central to both meme culture and political discourse in today's Hungary collapses when approached from the vantage point of the political economy of the European Union. After all, Hungary's present-day economic policy is built on the thoroughly neoliberal foundations of the European Union's common market (Böröcz and Sarkar 2017; Bohle and Greskovits 2019; Fabry 2019; Scheiring and Szombati 2020). Orbán plays a double game: his anti-EU rhetoric rests on an economic policy of low taxation for multinational companies and a supply of cheap labor that is highly attractive for foreign investors.[8] Although often aware of this complex entanglement, the Budapest liberal milieu, ourselves included, tends to anchor itself in a liberalism that expresses its opposition to Orbán in a language of European values.

This eclipsing of the entanglement of Hungarian illiberalism and the European Union's neoliberalism becomes especially prominent in memes that depict the country's economic situation as deriving from the moral flaws of the masses. Such memes ridicule a politics based on material interest and need. Like students at Örkény, Illiberal Memes often refers to people in rural areas—commonly old people, and especially grandmothers—as those to blame for Hungary's failure to

fulfill its democratic promise. Rural elderly are routinely portrayed as preferring grocery vouchers, or most poignantly, a sack of potatoes, to democracy—a trope common across the former Soviet Union and postsocialist Europe (Adriaans 2017). They are depicted rushing to like Orbán's Facebook statuses or queuing for free foodstuffs provided by Fidesz. Thus while critical of the regime, Illiberal Memes and similar meme pages reinforce the coupling of neoliberalism and democracy, central to the "end of history" narrative of the early 1990s (Fukuyama 1992), with echoes of the undelivered "catching up" with the West that postsocialist states were supposed to achieve when history ended.

A post by Illiberal Memes neatly exemplifies how the Budapest liberal milieu imagines the lifeworlds of low-income Fidesz voters. The meme portrays the increasing levels of excitement of a Shiba Inu dog who is simply called a "Fidesz pensioner" (Figure 6). In a sequence of four images, the dog is offered first one liter of milk, then four kilograms of potatoes, followed by firewood,[9] and culminating in a grocery voucher. By the time the grocery voucher is on offer, the dog shakes in such excitement that its blurred head is hardly recognizable as that of a dog.

Figure 6. The Fidesz voting pensioner as a dog offered a series of bribes: one liter of milk, four kilos of potatoes, firewood, and an Erzsébet grocery voucher.

Potatoes, as Nancy Ries (2009) has shown in the context of postsocialist Russia, symbolize social stratification. In Hungary, the skyrocketing number of memes featuring potatoes caricature the intersection of class, age, and economic

status, while also targeting the very real practice of the Orbán regime to give out extra grocery vouchers named after a famous Austro-Hungarian Empress (Sisi), known as Erzsébet Vouchers (*Erzsébet utalvány*). The government distributes these vouchers widely before elections or holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Although the sums, averaging between 20 and 40 euros, might seem small, for many living in poverty they offer a sorely needed financial boost.

In reality, the profile of Fidesz voters is complex and difficult to generalize. There are indeed many voters who fit the stereotype held by urban liberals of rural pensioners. But the voters also include stable upper middle-class voters and entrepreneurs who fare relatively well under the regime (Greskovits 2020). In addition, the regime relies on many ethnic Hungarians from Romania and Serbia to whom Fidesz granted citizenship and voting rights without a requirement of residency in Hungary in 2010 (Melegh 2016). Finally and perhaps most important, Fidesz draws support from conservative voters who perceive the socialist opposition as tainted by its actually existing historical ties to the Communist Party.

In spite of this diverse base, meme culture designates the rural grandmas as urban liberalism's Other, not quite temporally co-present with the youth who identify as liberal and view Hungary with ironic meme glasses. Yet these grandmothers are not merely imagined ones. As many of our interlocutors can painfully testify, when liberal urbanites' own grandparents vote for Fidesz, relations become realigned and families tear apart. The fact that many followers of Illiberal Memes know this well does not contradict their reproduction of one-dimensional stereotypes. After all, the memetic sensibilities around Illiberal Memes are not about unambiguously claiming poignant satire and comparisons as *real*. Rather, the caricatures of Fidesz voters constitute liberal distanciations that turn felt tragedy into tragicomedy, consoling those who feel they have no other way to exert influence. In the next section, we turn to the implications for everyday lifeworlds when no other means of confronting or critiquing authoritarian politics appear possible outside of using memetic irony.

MEMEIFICATION AND THE LIMITS OF LIBERAL PARODY

In the highly charged elections of April 2018, Fidesz secured a third consecutive supermajority after an election period characterized by debates revolving around Soros and migration, as well as extensive propaganda campaigns that portrayed opposition politicians as working for Soros.[10] Numerous opposition parties attempted to coordinate candidates that would prevent a Fidesz supermajority, but to the disappointment of many, they failed to cooperate in time. In this context,

the victory of Fidesz by no means surprised liberal circles. Nevertheless, it was felt as an excruciating blow, as yet another entrenchment of a non-democratic regime.

Julian and Johanna had both proudly voted for the first time in their lives. Debates over whom to vote for had been constant: Johanna had simply followed the popular strategy of tactical voting of whichever candidate in her district had the best chance of defeating the Fidesz candidate. Julian had voted for, and even joined, a new youthful and tech-savvy party named Momentum. Seeing the electoral map painted nearly completely in Fidesz's orange color only a few hours later came as a crushing experience. With her friends, Johanna sat on the bank of the Danube in the middle of the night, crying over the catastrophic results, and discussing with their group the prospects of emigration, as she had been admitted to study gender studies and Hebrew at a reputable university in the United Kingdom. Julian watched the election at home with a friend, and recounted later how they had become paralyzed, unable to do anything but stare at the laptop screen in disbelief. The shock of the election result was visceral: at this stage, there was literally *nothing* funny about Orbán, Fidesz, or the propaganda.

The day after the elections, the mood in Örkény was bleak. As the afternoon sun shone directly into the classroom from the high windows, Johanna and Julian descended into a vocal argument over what should be the next course of action. Julian was devastated by Momentum's poor performance: nearly everyone he knew had voted for them, and yet the party did not even gather enough votes for a seat in parliament. Julian was adamant that now was the time to mobilize, go to the countryside, talk to non-voters and Fidesz voters. Johanna blamed him for simplifying the matter. "But it's not possible for us *not to do* something!" Julian exclaimed. Johanna snapped back: "But we are in Budapest, this country is bigger than our small intelligentsia [*értelmiségi*] circles!" Julian demanded more: "Exactly—and now is the time to go to the countryside, and tell the people of the reality [*valóság*]—because the country is lost!" He questioned whether this really was the right moment to leave Hungary, as he had planned to. Johanna waved her hands in the air and yelled in disagreement: "It isn't that simple! You make it sound like youth would have to choose between emigration and revolution!" If she left the country, it did not mean she was not connected, did not care, or unable to do something. Julian remarked grimly: "If there will be a revolution in Hungary, it will be a civil war between Budapest and the countryside [*vidék*]. . . ."

Julian was cut short when the history teacher, Kati, walked in. She immediately reflected on the awkward atmosphere in the class and exclaimed that she understood today was a special day. Nevertheless, in accordance with the policy

of the entire school, they would not talk about the elections. The entire class immediately erupted in protest, but Kati shook her head. "But don't worry, we will study something that might help you make sense of some things, and we will do small group work to allow for debate," she told them.

Kati continued to introduce the topics of the day: two influential theories that had shaped politics after 1989: Samuel Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations and Francis Fukuyama's thesis on the fall of Soviet Union, marking the end of history and the global victory of liberal democracy.[11] The class was supposed to read excerpts of both texts and debate in small groups: Who was right, and who was wrong? Everyone proceeded with the task, half concentrating, except for Julian: not even looking at his phone, he simply sat behind his desk, did not move, and stared at the ground in front of him.

At this point, the ironic sensibilities of meme culture appeared unable to account for the situation. The youth disagreed on whether people could be reasoned out of their voting behaviors by simply telling them the *truth* about the Orbán regime. The inefficacy of memes as a strategy of resistance may not surprise anthropologists, who increasingly note that the socialities of political parody cannot be reduced to the binary of domination and resistance (Petrović 2018). It also calls to mind an attempt by the European Commission to challenge Hungarian illiberalism through its social media outreach activities. In February 2019, after reinvigorated discussion in the European Union about what many perceived as the Hungarian government's undermining of an EU-wide migration policy, Fidesz had launched a series of billboards depicting a laughing George Soros and the president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker. Insinuating that the European Union's critique of Fidesz was actually engineered by Soros, the slogan read "You, too, deserve to know what Brussels is up to!" (Figure 7).

In response, the European Commission used its social media accounts to circulate its own meme (Figure 8), in English and Hungarian. The Facebook post reproduced the propaganda billboard almost identically, but it replaced the image of Soros with a picture of Orbán and Juncker together, imposed on a blue background. In a font nearly the same as that on the original Fidesz billboard, the European Commission's meme read, "You, too, deserve FACT not FICTION." The image was accompanied by a caption emphasizing that it was the Hungarian government, not Soros, who was responsible for EU policies: "The Hungarian government campaign beggars belief. It is shocking that such a ludicrous conspiracy theory has reached the mainstream to the extent it has."

Figure 7. Billboard sponsored by the Hungarian government depicting Juncker conspiring with Soros: "You, too, have the right to know what Brussels is up to!" Photo by Valerie Hopkins.

Figure 8. The European Commission's meme response to the above billboard.

In reality, apart from sharp rhetorical comments and a number of legal proceedings with little or no effect, the European Union has been able to do very

little about democratic backsliding and the erosion of the rule of law in Hungary. In this sense, neither Johanna and Julian nor the EU could do much more than respond with memes. They are both captive to the memetic logic of parodic imitation, while the frame is set by the Hungarian government's propaganda.

This highlights once more how memetic practices establish a continual web of relations between the visual discourse of Fidesz propaganda campaigns and the creation of memes that parody that very propaganda. Each takes up almost any visual element to reduce complex questions into matters of a simple juxtaposition of two polarized sides, and depends on using captioning and stock photos to turn memorable slogans into recognizable variations.

Michael Taussig has famously drawn on Walter Benjamin's writings on mimesis to think through what he calls the mimetic faculty: the human capacity for imitation and copying. For Taussig (1993, xiii), "the wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power." In this case, it is remarkable that the border and security discourse of Fidesz is presented by the EU here as in fact an accurate portrayal of its own position (Kallius 2016). Rather than subverting Fidesz propaganda, one could argue that this memeification of international politics furthers the interests of the Hungarian government by parroting its tropes and normalizing its polarizing communication style.

The similarity between propaganda and critical memes also highlights the enduring ambiguity of montage as a political technique that can be both subversive and suppressive. Radical theorists of montage such as Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein have pointed to the capacity for it to generate sudden shocks of insight that shake people out of their somnambulant state. Others, such as Leni Riefenstahl, used it for spectacular displays to cover up fissures in the social fabric (Suhr and Willerslev 2013, 11). Whereas these early theorists wrote in an era in which montage was a specialized activity of film- and image-makers, the current era has made montage integral to the dispositions of any smartphone-savvy person. As teenagers turn their prom night into a series of fifty memes, it would be hard to claim an inherent emancipatory power to montage. In the students' context, however, what memetic practices of montage effectuate is the locating of liberal positions in a field of illiberalism.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have explored the entanglements of liberalism, propaganda, and social media in contemporary Hungary through our concept of the meme ra-

dar, which we theorize as an embodied disposition that perceives everyday situations as memes. In the Hungarian context, memetic sensibilities can be seen in a wide variety of everyday contexts in relation to the ubiquity of illiberal state propaganda, as youth seek to neutralize it through ironic capturing, framing, and captioning. The centrality of memes and montage in online and offline contexts, from the classrooms of a liberal high school in Budapest to the European Commission's social media feeds, reveals a memeified liberalism that continually reworks the similarities between the propaganda of an illiberal state and the practices of distanciation through which people seek to negate it. As youth perceive, edit, and recirculate parodic takes on the national irreality, the everyday becomes imbued with brief moments of effervescence, simultaneously constituting a sense of reality and shared liberal notions of the good. Such moments reinforce the notion that truth in today's Hungary is the privilege of a shrinking minority.

Although this article focuses on 2017 and 2018, we do not want to suggest that these years mark the illiberal end of history in Hungary. In 2015 Fukuyama himself gave a speech at Central European University, today forced to relocate to Vienna and mostly referred to as Soros University by Hungarian officials and the international media, with the optimistic message that, "in a decade, illiberal democracies will be over for good."[12] Far from being over for good, the Fidesz illiberal agenda remains internationally proactive: it is not coincidental that influential members of the government fraternize with figures such as the American alt-right cult figure Steve Bannon. As the regime presents itself as a subversive but righteous underdog in the *global* fight against liberal elites, its political communications strategies increasingly focus on international legitimacy. For instance, Orbán's and other high-profile Fidesz politicians' Facebook and Instagram pages are bilingual in English and Hungarian, and the state TV broadcasts online daily news in English, Chinese, German, and Russian.[13] The Prime Minister's Cabinet Office runs a popular English-language portal (abouthungary.hu), where one may find, for instance, the international spokesperson Zoltán Kovács's emphatic rebuttal of many of the claims we have made in this article.[14]

After the parliamentary elections in April 2018, both Julian and Johanna did well in their high school final exams. Johanna moved to London to attend university, while Julian chose to study in a smaller English town. An aspiring journalist, Julian had seriously considered a bachelor's degree in Digital Culture at a top university in London. After attending a sample lecture in person, however, he decided against it. With some frustration, he exclaimed: "It's just not worth an annual £10,000 tuition fee to sit in a classroom and study *what is a meme*."

ABSTRACT

This article examines the social media practices through which young Hungarians deliberate the workings of truth and the meanings of liberalism under Viktor Orbán's authoritarian regime. Noting similarities between ubiquitous government propaganda billboards and the aesthetics of parodic social media content, these youth increasingly perceive everyday situations as internet memes. Navigating generational differences, class antagonisms, and rural-urban divisions, for them, seeing the world as a meme anchors the youth's sense of truth and untruth and liberal identity in a polarized political field. We trace the everyday practices of montage through which conspiratorial billboard campaigns and the parodic forms of internet memes become linked, and observe how the visual, visceral, and networked sensibilities of meme culture help neutralize illiberal propaganda by turning it into a source of the self. [Hungary; liberalism; memes; political parody; authoritarianism; propaganda; social media]

KIVONAT

Írásunkban azokat a közösségi média gyakorlatokat vizsgáljuk, amelyeken keresztül a magyar fiatalok értelmezik és reflektálnak arra, hogy mi az igazság és mit jelent a liberalizmus Orbán Viktor autoriter rezsimében. A mindent átható kormánypropaganda óriásplakátjai és a parodisztikus közösségi médiatartalmak esztétikája közötti hasonlóságot felismerve, ezek a fiatalok egyre inkább internet mémekben ragadják meg a hétköznapok történéseit. A generációs különbségek, a társadalmi osztályok közti antagonizmusok és a vidék-város megosztottság gondolati terében egyensúlyozva, a világot mémeken keresztül látva, ezek segítenek a fiataloknak eligazodni igazság- és valótlanság között, és irányt mutatnak liberális identitásuk megéléséhez egy kiélezett politikai erőtérben. Azokat a mindennapi mém-gyártó gyakorlatokat követjük nyomon, amelyeken keresztül a konspiratív plakátkampányok és a parodisztikus internet mémek összekapcsolódnak, megfigyelve, hogy a mémkultúra vizuális, zsigeri és hálózatba rendeződő érzékenysége hogyan semlegesíti az illiberális propagandát azáltal, hogy az önkifejezés és öndefiníció forrásává teszi. [Magyarország, liberalizmus, mémek, politikai paródia, autoritarizmus, propaganda, közösségi média]

NOTES

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1. The notion of the Soros Plan is akin to the Great Replacement Theory, a far-right idea developed by the French author Renaud Camus that has also gained prominence in the United States in recent years. In Hungary it was propagated via government questionnaires, such as the "National Consultation on the Soros Plan," and in dramatic television ads during commercial breaks.

2. The expulsion of the Central European University made it the second exile university in Europe since World War II, after the exile of the European Humanities University, forced to relocate from Belarus to Lithuania in 2004.
3. In Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak's (2010) work on U.S. late night shows and other forms of late-liberal popular culture, the Russian notion of *stiob* is used more loosely to refer also to overt parody with no indeterminacy about the authenticity of the content.
4. The Illiberal Memes Facebook page was taken down on May 28th, 2021 after a violation of Facebook's user policy. At the time it had 71,000 followers on Facebook. Their memes from 2019 onwards can still be accessed on Instagram at http://www.instagram.com/illiberal.memes.
5. The Fidesz government usually responds to accusations of anti-Semitism by claiming that it is, in fact, protecting Europe's Jewish population by limiting immigration from Muslim countries. See "Hungary Tells UK Jewish Group to 'Mind Its Own Business' over Antisemitism," *Guardian*, February 13, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/feb/13/hungary-tells-uk-jewish-group-to-mind-its-own-business-over-antisemitism. Accessed July 5, 2022.
6. Quote translated by the authors from Dávid Klág, "A magyar politika szereplői önmagukban nevetségesek," January 9, 2019, https://index.hu/kultur/2019/01/09/illiberal_memes_facebook_interju_mem_humor/. Accessed August 24, 2019.
7. Video posted on Viktor Orbán's Facebook page, "The Easter Ham," *A Húsvéti Sonka*, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10156087060756093. Accessed August 24, 2019.
8. According to the *Financial Times* in 2019, about 30 percent of the Hungarian industry's output depends on the foreign car industry. See Valerie Hopkins, "Hungarians' 18 Percent Pay Rise Stirs German Car Industry," *Financial Times*, February 1, 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/63d132ea-2561-11e9-8ce6-5db4543da632. Accessed August 15, 2019.
9. Utility and gas bills in particular are notoriously high in Hungary. Especially outside Budapest, many cannot afford gas heating and resort to wood heating instead.
10. The OECD characterized these elections as only partly free. Not long after, Freedom House downgraded the status of Hungary from a "free society" to a "partly free society" in its rankings.
11. These were not the teacher's choices, as Fukuyama and Huntington both feature in the centrally planned high school history curriculum.
12. "Fukuyama Speaks at CEU about the Future of Liberal Democracy | Central European University," Central European University website, https://www.ceu.edu/article/2015-10-14/fukuyama-speaks-ceu-about-future-liberal-democracy. Accessed July 5, 2022.
13. The main English-language news portal of the Fidesz government is https://abouthungary.hu, and the daily English-language broadcast *Hungary Reports* can be found on *MédiaKlikk*, https://mediaklikk.hu/musor/angol-nyelvu-hirek-m1/. Accessed 5 July 2022.
14. See, for instance, Kovacs's response to coverage on Hungary by the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*: "Brace Yourselves! The Progressive Elite of *The New York Times* Editorial Board Is so Woke about Hungary," *About Hungary* blog, https://abouthungary.hu/blog/brace-yourselves-the-progressive-elite-of-the-new-york-times-editorial-board-is-so-woke-about-hungary. Accessed July 5, 2022.

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