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Viktor Orban, Trump and the Populist Battle Over Public Space



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Almost a year after President Trump assured a stricken nation that there were “very fine people on both sides” of the Charlottesville riots, a law banning homeless people from public spaces went into effect in Hungary. At first glance, the two events seem connected only by the similarities of the populists—Viktor Orban and Donald Trump—who presided over them. They are also, however, united by the effects they produced: the politicization of public space. The Hungarian legislation and the turmoil caused by Trump’s moral equivalencies reveal how politicized space is not a distracting side effect of populist

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politics; rather, public space treated as a symbol of national identity is a defining characteristic of populism.

Swept under the rug in Hungary

On October 15th, a law banning homeless people from Hungary's World Heritage Sites and other public places went into effect. The law is the culmination of an escalating series of attempts to target the homeless, efforts which led Viktor Orbán's government to amend the Constitution to protect legislation passed last year from judicial oversight. At a time when Hungary faces a host of pressing challenges, from the migrant crisis to an escalating confrontation with the EU, Viktor Orbán's party is sinking an inordinate amount of time and energy into punishing the homeless. The question is: why the outsized investment for such a seemingly marginal reward?

Budapest has one of the highest rates of homelessness of cities in Eastern Europe. The new legislation aims to push that population, numbering roughly 10,000, into emergency shelters that can, according to activists, accommodate about 6,000 people. The removal of the homeless from key areas of the city represents an attempt to scrub Budapest clean, and along with it, burnish the image of the government itself. After all, large groups of homeless people belie Fidesz's grandiose claims of having jumpstarted Hungary's economy. The bodies that line sidewalks or occupy benches in plazas are a stark visual contrast to the hustle and bustle of a country that wishes it hummed at full economic throttle.

The conflict over homelessness in Hungary is not just about marketing, however; the government's actions have drawn widespread condemnation from human rights groups and international organizations, including the EU and the UN. Yet Orbán's government has refused to budge despite the pushback. Indeed, the newly implemented legislation pertains to the key tenet of populist politics: a referendum on who constitutes the "public" that has a right to access public space. By depriving the homeless of this right, the government casts them as a population external to the political body. The symbolic expulsion of an undesired minority enacts the boundary line of an imagined Hungarian "people"; the "people" in this way are constituted as much by what they are not (homeless, vagrant, left behind by a stumbling economy) as what they are. Politicizing public space, in other words, becomes both a marketing tactic and a marker of national identity.

Stirring the Confederate Pot

The Hungarian government's efforts to monopolize public space resemble the actions taken by another populist regime across the pond. President Trump waded into the

political firestorm surrounding the removal of Confederate Statues in Charlottesville by equating the moral status of protestors with the neo-nazis and white nationalists against whom they demonstrated. Trump refused to recant even after his comments provoked widespread criticism. His decisions beg the question: what about the removal of Confederate statues from public lands so troubled Trump that he risked political exposure and widespread condemnation (even from his [own party](#)) to get involved?

The answer, simply put, is that the politicization of public space is not an ancillary problem for populists; rather, it provides a symbolic anchor for the strategic manipulation of identity politics. Populists politicize public space to solidify their base. The removal of Confederate statues quickly became an inflection point for the far-right, and Trump saw an opportunity to use a tense situation as a means of re-articulating and consolidating an identity for his followers, by defining what it means to be a member of the “American people.” By coalescing around Charlottesville, fringe-right groups acquired a positive identity to protect whose tangible markers, the scattered remnants of Confederate nostalgia, represent fading monuments to an imperiled cultural heritage. For populists like Orban and Trump, the conflict over public space is not the means to some policy end, like humanitarian relief for disenfranchised populations or preserving historical memories. Instead, spatial politics, a weapon in the construction of political identity, is the end in itself.

Identity over Utopia

The populist predilection for strategy and appearance at the expense of coherent ideology has led some political scientists to dub it “[a thin ideology](#),” or one capable of bending to accommodate various creeds. The charismatic political ideologies of the 20th century, though they ranged across the political spectrum, were united in their attempt to bend the arc of history towards an imagined utopia. The populist regimes of Trump and Orban have substituted for utopia the defense of a supposedly threatened identity. Populism, therefore, retains only the distant residue of past political movements by fabricating for its supporters a sense of identity lost. The actions of Trump and Orban undercut those grandiose 20th century ideals with a dose of 21st century cynicism; instead of striving for utopia, populism battles only for survival. Populist parties exist to capture and retain power, not to enact political reforms or realize revolutions. The point is to win, which one does by achieving identity, a kind of stasis aimed at arresting disruptive, inevitable agents of change like transnational migration or globalized markets. With an opposition, whether a

minority group or the homeless, symbolically expelled from the political body, the core identity of the national “people” attains a degree of stability, however fragile.

Finally, the attempt to freeze identity by anchoring it to certain spatial markers complements the populist approach to history. The phrase “Make America Great Again,” along with its Hungarian analogue, the red stop signs that adorned billboards all over Hungary during the election in April 2018, reveal fundamental anxieties about the passage of time and the forces of change. The stop signs were directed at the trickle immigrants arriving in Hungary from the Middle East, a population the signs outnumbered and whose threat they exaggerated. Similarly, the MAGA slogan evokes the idea of a future America— which we are exhorted to construct or “make”— that is paradoxically trapped in the past. The result is a temporal loop, as our imagination oscillates between repeating the past and gesturing at the future. Like the kleptocratic dictators whose actions they emulate, Trump and Orban seek to orchestrate a permanent stasis, a frozen conflict, where the nation moves neither forward nor backwards, but, paralyzed by fear, clings to a fabricated identity.

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