

# Introduction: The Aesthetic Politics of Far Right Movements

August 30, 20220 comments

*By Kyle Craig*

## Emergent Conversation 17

*This essay is part of the series PoLAR Online Emergent Conversation on Aesthetics and Politics of Far Right Movements*



Video released in 2022 by the "Luhansk People's Republic" in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine. The melody is from the song "[Wellerman](#)," a sea shanty popularized by Scottish postman [Nathan Evans](#), inspiring a wave of TikTok sea shanty remixes in 2020. From a [tweet](#) by [Max Seddon](#), Moscow bureau chief for the *Financial Times*, April 20, 2022.

This Emergent Conversation brings together global, interdisciplinary perspectives on the role aesthetic expressions and practices play in shaping, maintaining, reviving, and promulgating right-wing, authoritarian, and populist politics. Much of the scholarship on the recent rise of international right-wing movements has examined the economic, religious, and cultural processes that lay the foundations of such movements. Less critical attention has been paid to how everyday people, authoritarian strongmen, and everyone in-between feel, experience, and do politics through aesthetic forms that imbue those politics with meaning and potentiality. Aesthetics are fertile ground for cultivating right-

wing agendas. Without closely examining them, we risk reinforcing a misleading distinction between supposedly “real” politics and a world of mere representations (Butler 1999). It is not that politics have aesthetic qualities, but rather that aesthetics *are* politics. As anthropologist Jessica Winegar recently noted, we continue to take the aesthetic for granted at our peril (Winegar 2022).

This series casts a wide analytical net to capture a diverse range of definitions and locations of aesthetics and their unfolding in right-wing, authoritarian, and populist contexts. Essays in this collection examine aesthetics in relation to style or arts and cultural productions, practices, and expressions, showing how they are co-constitutive of national imaginaries, class subjectivities, truth and fiction, temporalities, and desires. The collection also brings into relief how affects, judgments, and gestures involving the senses and “the sensible” in everyday life act as modes of knowing, embodying, and acting out right-wing struggles for power (Rancière 2010, Mookherjee 2011).

The first collection in this series presents three perspectives on how aesthetics give force to right-wing politics in spectacular and banal ways that are nonetheless powerful in their allure and capacity to shape action. Joseph Moore examines how, through a complex and unorthodox set of aesthetic rituals and practices, self-described “sovereign citizens” in the US reject the legitimacy of the US government to exert legal authority over them. William H. Westermeyer discusses how visual art and sartorial choices shape what one might call experiences of “mutuality” among members of the US-based Tea Party Movement by ordering contemporary right-wing grievances and ideology into shared revisionist narratives of the country’s founding (see Hage 2012, Jazeel and Nayanika 2015). Finally, Krisztina Fehérvári investigates how Hungary’s right-wing nationalist and religious groups promote their agendas by linking them with the country’s decades-old Organicist aesthetic and its attendant positive sentiments—an aesthetic originally developed to replace “ugly” Soviet architecture.

Because the study of aesthetics and right-wing political movements is developing rapidly, this conversation is truly emergent, and we encourage authors to submit to the discussion. At the present moment of rising global authoritarianism, anthropologies of far-right aesthetics and affect are critically important. New contributions will be considered and published on a rolling basis in the form of short essays (1000-2500 words) as well as multi-media explorations, such as photo essays, short ethnographic films, or podcast episodes.

To contribute to this series, please submit abstracts of 250 words to Kyle Benedict Craig (kylecraig2023@u.northwestern.edu). Authors will be notified of a decision within a week of submission.



Kyle Craig is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University. His dissertation, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Amman, Jordan, examines the intersections of graffiti/street artists' visions of the ideal future city, neoliberal logics of urban development, and state governance of public aesthetics. As a *PoLAR* Digital Editorial Fellow, Kyle is curating the series *The Aesthetic Politics of Far Right Movements*, which focuses on the under-examined topic of how aesthetic expressions and practices give form to right-wing, authoritarian, and populist politics across the globe. If you would like to contribute to this series, reach out to him at: [kylecraig2023@u.northwestern.edu](mailto:kylecraig2023@u.northwestern.edu).

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# Christian Nationalism Goes Organic: Populist Politics and the Aesthetics of the Built Environment in Hungary

August 30, 20220 comments

*By Kriszti Fehérváry*

## Emergent Conversation 17

*This essay is part of the series [PoLAR Online Emergent Conversation on Aesthetics and Politics of Far Right Movements](#)*

Hungary is often in the news these days, with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party providing a “model” for a new kind of populist, authoritarian governance, most recently for the American right.[1] Much has been made of Orbán’s nationalist, pro-Christian, anti-Communist and anti-immigrant rhetoric, as well as the skills he has wielded as a lawyer to create what he calls an “illiberal democracy” through legislative and constitutional reform. Less commented on are the ways support for right-wing authoritarianism has been fostered through gradual, but often visually captivating and affectively appealing transformations to the built environment. The overriding aesthetic sensibility of these changes has been in line with Hungarian Organicism, an aesthetic that emerged during the state-socialist period in opposition to the “ugly” and “unnatural” aesthetics of Soviet-style modernist architecture. Since Fidesz took power in 2010, explicitly irredentist, Christian and supposedly “ancient” Hungarian (Magyar) monuments and signs have emerged on the landscape (see Hann 2014). However, there has also been a rise in much more subtle, secular structures that evoke such traditionalist, anti-modernist and religious agendas. This essay, then, will focus on how right-wing nationalists and religious groups have harnessed this Organicist aesthetic, one carrying all sorts of positive associations in Hungary, to naturalize, legitimate, and create affective support for their agendas.[2]

Let me illustrate what I mean by way of ordinary bus stops, erected in the suburbanized villages near Dunaújváros. Dunaújváros is a former “socialist city,” built in the Stalinist 1950s alongside a gigantic steel mill, and still widely considered one of the “ugliest” cities in Hungary with its preponderance of concrete block housing estates. Aesthetically, it is often used to epitomize all that was bad about the Communist period, such as the suppression of Hungarian national identity, spirituality, connectedness to the land and an ancient Magyar history.



Figure 1: Modernist bus stop in Kulcs (Photo 2010).[\[3\]](#)



Figure 2: Same bus stop with an Organicist makeover done in 2021 (Photo 2022).



Figure 3: Organic architecture-inspired bus stop in Rácalmás (Photo 2015).

The first bus stop (Figure 1) is a shabby Modernist structure, recognizable as a left-over from state socialism. The village council had the once-grey structure splashed with a coat of salmon-pink paint in an effort to obscure its alignment with a controversial past. The second is the bus stop that eventually replaced it (Figure 2), decked out in a local version of Organicism. It now features “natural” elements distinguished by their opposition to the “unnatural” aesthetics of state-socialist modernism: instead of concrete and steel, it uses “natural” materials (wooden walls, stone base, clay roofing tiles); instead of the gray of industrial modernity, it features colors indexing the natural world (green, ochre, red); and instead of the rectilinear, roofless cubes of modernist housing, it evokes domestic shelter with a pitched roof. The third bus stop (Figure 3) is one of many to be found in a neighboring village. In the shape of a mini-chapel, it’s an example of quasi-religious forms being smuggled onto the landscape by way of another kind of Organicist design (see Figure 7) featuring a red-tiled, asymmetrical roof, exposed wooden beam work, and white-washed walls.

I have written elsewhere about the aesthetic regimes I call Socialist Generic and Organicist Modern (Fehérváry 2012, 2013), but here I extend that analysis to show how religious, nationalist and irredentist motifs are being integrated into an already affectively-powerful aesthetic. This material fusing of otherwise separable orientations (religious; nationalist; irredentist) makes them seem inseparable as well as essentially identical to the widely-shared values of Organicism.

We might think that we should have seen this coming, that there is an aesthetic consonance between material indexes of the “natural” and “organic” with the ideologies of conservative, Christian and ethno-nationalist populism. However, I will show that it has taken a fair amount of time and work to

turn what was once a largely secular and modern Organic style (think Ikea), into an aesthetic that seamlessly integrates Christian and nationalist motifs. I focus on the example of a Lutheran Church in Dunaújváros, designed by an architect of the Hungarian Organic school, to show how the widespread appeal and moral value of this aesthetic was appropriated. Christian and nationalist symbolism was integrated into Organicism, even as this aesthetic was also being used for secular buildings, from private houses to shopping malls, public swimming pools, and community centers. [4] Finally, my engagements with this church and its pastor corresponds to findings showing that the growing visibility of Christianity on the landscape has not corresponded with increasing religiosity or religious practice. Instead, by integrating these motifs into Organicism, they work to make Christianity symbolically-integral to the Hungarian nation state.

## Organicist Modern and its Transformations

An Organicist Modern aesthetics in Hungary emerged to oppose or mediate the generic, Modernist aesthetics of the socialist state (1948-1989), epitomized in the uniform, rectilinear housing blocks that became iconic of Soviet-style state socialism. The material properties of these opposed aesthetic regimes were aligned with opposed values and meanings. Soviet-style modernist architecture came to be associated with an impersonal, bureaucratic and authoritarian socialist state, one committed to principles of efficiency, rationality, uniformity, and the power of “man over nature” (including God and spirituality), as well as to internationalism over the specificities of the nation. Organicism, then, was imbued with values of the “natural,” of the folk, of home, hearth, and human relationships, of color, play and individuality, as well as the need for beyond-human spirituality (see Fehérvári 2013).

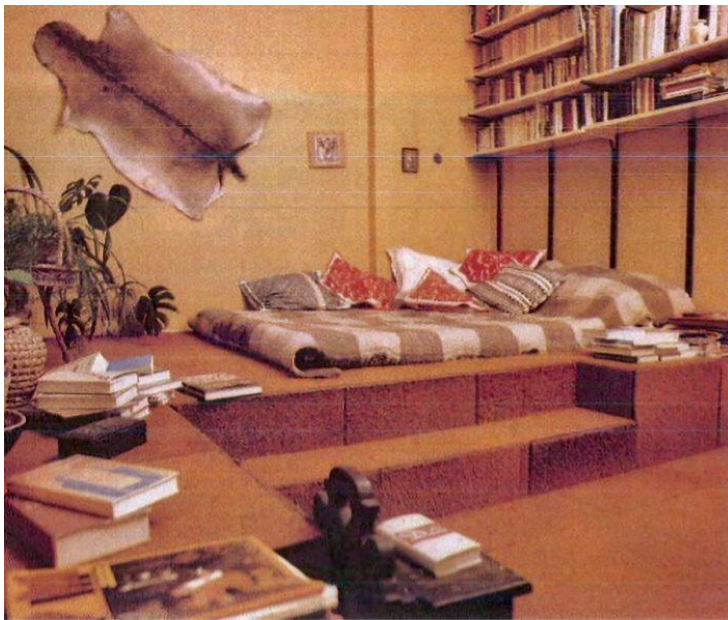


Figure 4: A version of vernacular Organicist décor within concrete block housing estates, including animal skins, folk embroidered pillows and carved wooden stool, plants and wool blanket, all making a cozy yet decidedly modern and secular space. Photo: Lakáskultúra 1984 19(2):15.

Numerous versions of Organicist aesthetics emerged in both professional and vernacular forms during the state-socialist period. Like Scandinavian design, Organicism in interior furnishings was decidedly modern, a way of warming the cold asceticism of high modernism with abundant use of wood, rounded forms, and “natural” textiles (Lofgren 1993; see also Murphy 2015 for the social politics of Swedish design). When folk art appeared, it was valued for its artisanal, craft materialities, patina, and national specificity in contrast to industrial production, rather than as a badge of ethno-nationalist sentiments. This vernacular Organicist Modern was also areligious, incorporating indexes of an idealized natural environment (wood, stone, earth tones) and animal world (wool and animal skins), often referencing spirituality but usually without invoking institutionalized religion (Figure 4). Even the versions of Organic architecture produced by marginalized professionals such as Imre [Makovecz](#), tended toward the fantastical and the animist, including those carried out in the form of chapels (Figure 5).<sup>[5]</sup> These Hungarian Organic school architects shared a commitment to place-based specificity, use of local materials, and buildings as shelters or sanctuaries—a far cry from Le Corbusier’s “machines for living.” While they drew on vernacular forms and folk art, they also drew on the anatomy of human and animal bodies as well as ancient Celtic and Far Eastern motifs. Makovecz in particular understood his architecture to be a “defensive magic against all impersonal powers,” including Communism and then, in the 1990s, corporate capitalism (Ferkai 1998, 291; Heathcote 1997).



Figure 5: Makovecz chapel in Siofok. Photo from [Makovecz.hu](#).



# Organicism's Role in Materializing Post-Socialist Modern Hungary

After the collapse of state socialism in 1989-90, the Hungarian Organic school of architecture became the official design ideology of the new, independent nation-state. Imre Makovecz was chosen to represent the country at the Seville Exposition in 1992, and his pavilion could not have been more diametrically opposed to the generic style of state-socialist modern. Inverting the Modernist paradigm of roofless cube, the pavilion was almost entirely covered by a slate roof in the shape of an enormous beetle shell. Constructed of “natural” materials, no two of the wooden joints were of the same size and the traditional craftsmen assembling it used no mechanical tools. Finally, in contrast to the future posited by Modernism, arising out of *tabula rasa*, at its center was a denuded tree, roots exposed under a glass floor (Figure. 6) to represent the nation's grounding in the soil of the past as its branches extended into the future (Eke 2006).

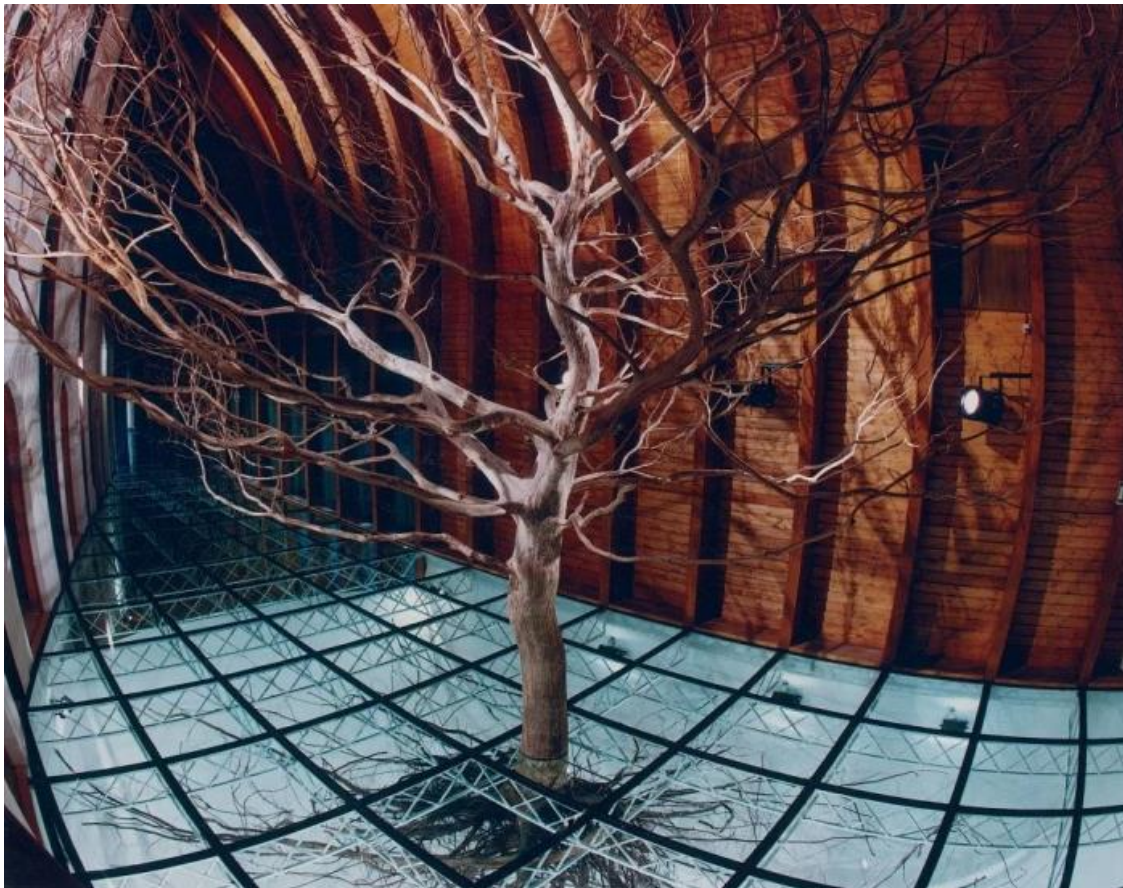


Figure 6: “Tree of Life” inside the Hungarian Pavilion at World's Fair in Seville, 1992. Photo from [Makovecz.hu](http://Makovecz.hu).

Throughout the country, Organicist aesthetics were key to a kind of moral transformation of both public civic and commercial as well as private spaces. City councils drew on it to transform austere, modernist public squares and buildings by using “natural” materials, “organic” forms (eschewing straight lines), and colorful but faded tones—most visible in the sherbet hues used to coat the modernist, concrete housing blocks. In the commercial sector, even computer tech shops featured store fronts of curving wood. For an aspiring middle class, Organicist Modern was transformed from a do-it-yourself form of décor into a commercially available style, materialized in increasingly expensive commodities as well as professionally-designed houses (Figure 7) (Fehérváry 2012).



Figure 7: Private house in Hungarian Organic style. (Photo 1997).

## Organicism and the Rise of Nationalist Christianity

Christian religious institutions adopted this anti-Communist Organicist aesthetic as the “natural” form for new churches around the country in the 1990s. This trend was particularly noticeable in the former socialist city of Dunaújváros. There, against the backdrop of rectangular Modernist housing estates, a number of new churches were erected, all by architects affiliated with the Organic movement (and most with funding from western Christian institutions). The point here is that these architects used Organicism and its anti-socialist associations to re-position Christianity as an integral part of a

new, post-socialist era. Rather than starting with the aesthetics of old, traditional churches and then incorporating some Organicist touches, they instead began with Organicist aesthetics and its new age spirituality to create visually-striking and affectively-appealing structures—that were then filled in with symbols and practices of Christianity.



Figure 8: Lutheran Church in Dunaújváros, with modern residential housing blocks in background. (Photo 1997).

I focus here on one of the most visually-striking structures, a Lutheran (“Evangelikus”) church positioned along the main entrance to the city (Figure 8). It was built in the early 1990s, with walls entirely of curving red brick topped by curving and asymmetrical red-tiled roofs. It went on to win a number of awards for its Organic school architect, Tamás Nagy. I first interviewed the church’s youthful and energetic pastor in 2014. He was deeply disappointed in the Fidesz regime for not doing even *more* to protect the Hungarian nation and foster conservative values since it had come to power in 2010. He had arrived in Dunaújváros to run the church in 1999, and saw his mission as parallel to the architectural design of the Church: countering the malign influence of the “artificially-created” city and the kinds of people it had produced over 40 years, people with no real roots, and who had not been raised with Church-going habits. His list of grievances included the fact that people no longer bothered to get married, and that those numbers were declining even though the Church remained a

popular place to get married; that women did not want to have children; and that people no longer needed community because of the internet.



Figure 9: Dunaújváros Lutheran church, interior. (Photo: 2014).

The pastor's philosophy came through most clearly in how he described the design and materials of the church itself, using his hands to illustrate the shape: the entire church with walled enclosure was shaped like an egg, the sign of life, with the fertilizing seed, the round "youth house" at its center. The chapel layout, he explained, also materialized Protestant theology: a more intimate space, to symbolize how close people were to God (in contrast to Catholic cathedrals with their vaulted ceilings). At the same time, the separation between the slightly higher altar and the pews, indexed that God was not on the same level with his people. The church space was "simple," he pointed out, without lots of adornment, but also "functional." He stressed that the wooden altar, the communion kneelers, and the lectern were all mobile—creating a flexible space that could be repurposed for community events like concerts. Finally, he felt the "natural" materials of wood and brick, and the third element, "light," made congregants feel good and "close to God" (Figure 9).

Inside the church itself, there was little in the way of explicit reference to the nation, but this was more than made up for by the additions the pastor himself had made to the church grounds. In fact, he was known in the community for how zealously he had embraced the new state holiday commemorating the Treaty of Trianon (1920), signed after the First World War, in which the former Hungarian Kingdom lost two-thirds of its territory and half of its Magyar (Hungarian) populations, particularly to neighboring Slovakia and Romania.<sup>[6]</sup> The Hungarian flag flew over a church courtyard occupied by some chickens he kept. He walked me past a carved wooden post in the style of the Hungarian Székely people (now in Romania), which commemorated the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and over to a red-brick and granite sculpture he'd commissioned to monumentalize the "tragedy" of Trianon and fuse it materially with Christianity (Figure 10). Set in a bower of trees, it was still adorned with dried-out wreaths from the ceremony he'd conducted weeks before on the day of its signing, June 4th. Carved as an open bible, it features the shape of truncated Hungary contained within the outline of Greater Hungary across its stone pages.<sup>[7]</sup>



Figure 10: Monument for the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, Lutheran Church. (Photo 2014).

Eight years later, in the summer of 2022, I attended a June 4<sup>th</sup> Treaty of Trianon commemoration held inside the church, expecting to be part of a crowd. To my surprise, the combination of church service and political event was sparsely attended, although a number of photographers were there from the

local media and mayor's office. I gradually realized that just about everyone in attendance was there in some representative capacity, from the four black-suited members of the ultra-nationalist, irredentist *Our Homeland* movement, to the representatives of the city's Junior College, the local theater, and the public library. The event featured a visiting pastor and the town's youthful mayor, a member of the formerly far-right Jobbik party. The mayor used the occasion to advocate for the right of Hungarians as well as all ethnic groups to use and be educated in their mother tongue. He also insisted that his role as leader was to foster understanding and communication rather than to foment strife, in a not-so veiled critique of far-right irredentist groups. After the service, we all filed outside to the monument for the customary wreath-laying ceremony. Up to this point, inexplicably, the church's pastor was nowhere to be seen. But after the wreaths were laid, he popped out from behind a screen to deliver a short benediction. I discovered later that his views had become so radical, he had refused to be under the same roof as the Jobbik mayor, with his watered-down nationalism. The service ended as we were invited to sing along with a piped-in version of the Székely hymn, although no one seemed to know the words.

Unlike Poland, where the cross has long been considered a symbol of the nation (Zubrzycki 2006), in Hungary religious and nationalist motifs have been reintroduced via their integration into an Organicist aesthetic—one that emerged in opposition to the generic modernism of the socialist state. While Organicist Modern drew on natural, organic, folk, and spiritual motifs, it was nonetheless a new and, in its vernacular forms, modern and secular aesthetic. Over the past decade, more overtly nationalist, Christian, and “ancient” Hungarian motifs have become increasingly woven into this Organicism, a process that has taken time and labor. The result has been a transformed and yet affectively-powerful aesthetic that situates the Hungarian nation and its people in an ancient, mythical, and natural order of ethnic exceptionalism. And yet this aesthetic imagery is of a decidedly twenty-first-century post-modernism. It is of a piece with the globally-admired and “empowering” aesthetics of pagan runes, warrior kings and mythical beasts, disseminated in video games and taken up as tattoos. At the same time, in Hungary the incorporation of Christianity into this aesthetic remains largely symbolic. Cute chapel-like bus stops might shore up affective support for Fidesz's project of making Christianity central to national heritage. But, as many have noted, this has not translated into increased participation in church services or in Christian religious practice.<sup>[8]</sup> The behavior of the church pastor at the Trianon commemoration ceremony is a dramatic illustration of this contradiction: instead of espousing the universalism of a Christianity that transcends national borders within the church building, he stood outside it, aligning himself instead with the “God” of Greater Hungary, engraved into a granite bible.

This essay set out to demonstrate that the appeal of populist, authoritarian regimes on both the right and the left today is not limited to the inflaming rhetoric of exclusionary exceptionalism, preying on the emotions of those dispossessed by global capitalism and its failed promises of borderless utopias. It can also work in more subtle but equally powerful ways, through the affective appeal of everyday aesthetics (see Chamorro 2020). We can see it in what Tucker Carlson had to say about Hungary during Orbán's recent North America tour, that it is “A free and decent and beautiful country that

cares about its people, their families, the physical landscape. Great place.” [9] Nothing here about policy, but about a kind of beauty equated with freedom, decency and “caring.”



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## NOTES

[1] For example: David Harding, “Viktor Orban Is Now the Darling of the US Right.” *The Independent*. August 2, 2022. Accessed August 18 2022: <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/editors-letters/viktor-orban-us-visit-cpac-texas-b2136709.html>.

Patrick Kingsley, “As West Fears the Rise of Autocrats, Hungary Shows What’s Possible.” *The New York Times*. February 20, 2018. Accessed August 18 2022: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/world/europe/hungary-orban-democracy-far-right.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Andrew Marantz, “The Illiberal Order: Does Hungary Offer a Glimpse of Our Authoritarian Future?” *The New Yorker*. July 4, 2022. Accessed August 18 2022: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/07/04/does-hungary-offer-a-glimpse-of-our-authoritarian-future>.

Ishaan Tharoor, “The Orbanization of America: The U.S. Right Walks in Hungary’s Path.” *The Washington Post*. May 17, 2022. Accessed August 18 2022: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/17/viktor-orban-american-right-illiberal-orbanization/>.

Editors, “Viktor Orban’s Victory is a Triumph for Illiberal Nationalism.” *The Economist*. 9 April 2022. Accessed August 18 2022: <https://www.economist.com/europe/viktor-orbans-victory-is-a-triumph-for-illiberal-nationalism/21808575>.

[2] I draw on theory that explores the affective power of materials, objects and the environment arising via semiosis, such as Alfred Gell (1996), as well as Nancy Munn (1986) and others drawing on a Peircean semiotics. I find this approach compatible with the work of some affect theorists, who make room for historical experience and cultural conditioning regarding the affective “charges” of the material, such as Yael Navaro (2012). Affect theory that insists on abrupt intensities and disruption works less well for the slower processes I am describing here.

[3] All photos by author, unless otherwise noted. For more images, see: <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/fehervary/>

[4] See photos at <https://www.makovecz.hu/haz/en/archive/building/> Organic architecture was used for the visually-astonishing [soccer stadium](#) recently built in Orbán’s childhood village, a veritable Organicist cathedral for Hungary’s most nationalist sport, as well as Orbán’s new office away from parliament. See David Goldblatt and Daniel Nolan, “Viktor Orbán’s Reckless Football Obsession.” *The Guardian*. 11 Jan 2018. Accessed August 18 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/11/viktor-orban-hungary-prime-minister-reckless-football-obsession>

[5] In state-socialist Hungary, architects deviating from the modernist orthodoxy were marginalized professionally, often sent to out of the way places to design village community centers, camping huts, and cemetery chapels. For a quick look at the Hungarian Organic movement, and Imre Makovecz, see Tas Tobias’s [The Magical Architecture of Imre Makovecz](#).

[6] This official holiday has provided legitimacy for what Margit Feischmidt has analyzed as a new “cult of Trianon” (2020). Across the country, church grounds—Catholic and Protestant—are now often used for such ceremonies and provide the space for accompanying memorial monuments.

[7] Talking nonstop, the pastor bent down to show me one of the paving stones—what he considered to be a “sign” of sorts—in the shape of Hungary, though he seemed somewhat ambivalent about it. It was only later that I realized the obvious: the stone was in the diminished shape of post-Trianon Hungary!

[8] Collins, Will. 2019. “The Myth of a Christian Revival in Eastern Europe.” *The American Conservative*, January 7, 2019. Accessed 04 August, 2022: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/the-myth-of-a-christian-revival-in-eastern-europe/>.

[9] David Folkenflik. “Hungary’s Autocratic Leader Tells U.S. Conservatives to Join his Culture War.” *NPR*. August, 4 2022. Accessed August 18, 2022: <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1115541985>. The conservative political commentator and Fox News host Tucker Carlson has made several widely-publicized visits to Hungary, most recently in May 2022, when the American Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held its first-ever overseas conference there. I am grateful to Kyle Craig, the editor for this PoLAR digital essay series, for pointing me to this quote and its relevance here.

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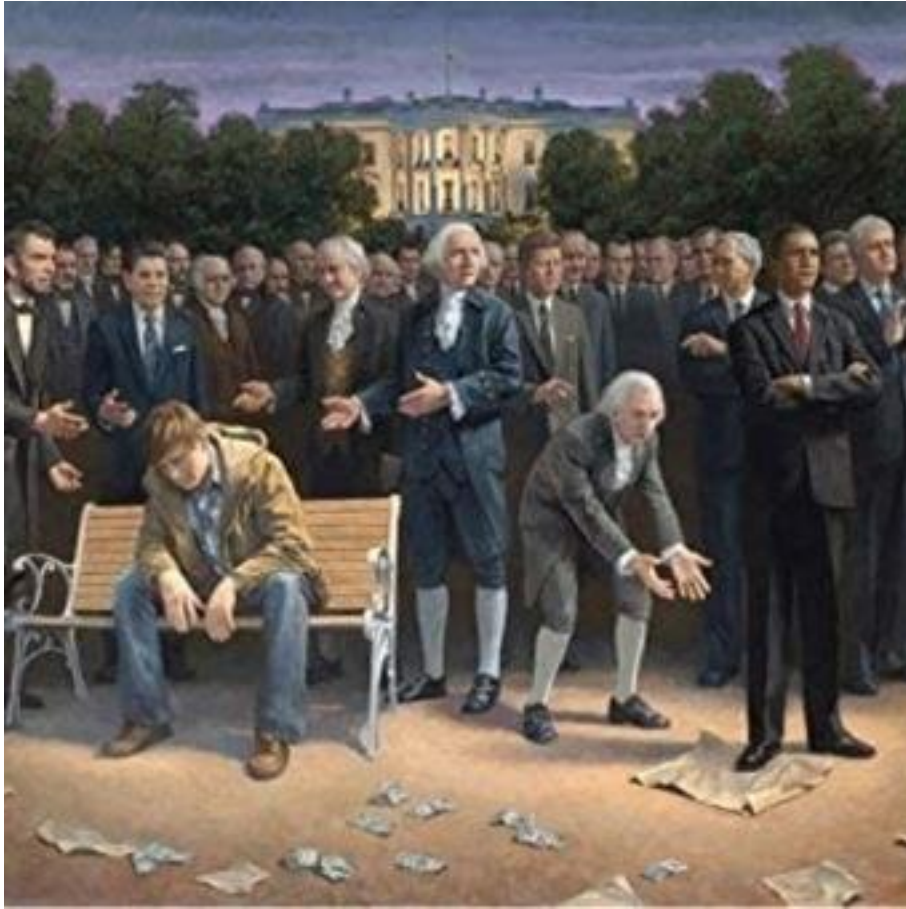
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