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1

Introduction

The very first interview I conducted for this book, with the owner of a small fashion label, turned out to be an unexpected epiphany. It brought into sharp relief a host of challenges—methodological, logistical, and ethical—that I would be facing in this research and was apparently oblivious to. After a long back-and-forth trying to organize a meeting, the owner asked me to go to see her in her home in Esztergom, an old historical city on the Danube, the seat of the Catholic archbishop in Hungary. The city is located northwest of Budapest, literally a stone's throw across the river from Slovakia, as this section of the Danube doubles as Hungary's border. I started out on a brutally hot summer day taking the train from Budapest's Western Railway station. I was relieved that my train was one of the neat, modern, air-conditioned Siemens railcars—not the gritty 1980s wagons with Canadian geese-poop-colored, faux leather seats that you literally stick to in the summer heat. This gave me hope that I wouldn't be completely drenched in sweat by the time I reached my interviewee's home. There were other surprises along the way, though.

I arrived in Esztergom roughly an hour later. The train station—a typical turn-of-the-twentieth-century building one can still find in cities across Central Europe that were once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—was being demolished. I found myself in a desolate construction site among makeshift containers for construction workers sweltering in the sun. Uber and other car-sharing services were banned in Hungary at the time, so it took me considerable trouble to get hold of a taxi. I also learned from the driver that

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the place I had to go to was quite a distance away, on the fringes of the city, somewhere near the hills that used to be an area for vacationers and summer cottages beyond official city boundaries. We drove through the historic city center, which looked surprisingly dilapidated: boarded up buildings covered with graffiti; even some graffiti in runic script, an important radical nationalist symbol. As we turned from the river toward the hills after a twenty-minute ride and were nearing the address, the driver casually told me that he knew one family, the Ambrus family, who lived around here. And last week there was even a TV crew from Budapest that came to interview them, he added. I replied, baffled, that this was quite a coincidence because I was coming to see the same family—the wife, Réka, more precisely. I ignored the comment about the TV crew. I was just happy that we had finally arrived and I wasn't late for the interview.

In fact, Réka was not quite ready yet and asked me to take a seat on the porch, leaving me temporarily in her husband Attila's care. The place was a small but friendly summer cottage converted into a year-around home. The porch was refreshingly cool. Attila offered me some water and a savagely strong espresso, and he entertained me until his wife became available. He was a short, muscular, middle-aged man with closely cropped hair and a horseshoe moustache that Hungarian men smitten by mystic nationalism often seem to sport. He looked strangely familiar, but I chalked this up to his facial hairstyle. He asked me about my project but soon began to talk eagerly about himself: how he was a potter working in a traditional Transylvanian style, and how nowadays even Transylvania—which is still widely considered a heaven of authentic craftsmanship—was flooded with fake craft products. He himself was fooled by buying a large “traditional” vase that turned out to be a useless knockoff and, most annoyingly, not waterproof. But, he continued, the vase in the end did immense service to him when he hid a large sum of money in it that the police failed to locate upon searching his apartment. He also explained how he had learned pottery in prison because he spent a fair portion of his life on the “dark side.” I only half listened to these outlandish stories, thinking that he was either a genuine nutcase or just pulling my leg. I smiled and nodded politely, trying to concentrate on what I wanted to cover in the interview, stressing over whether I had enough cash for the taxi back to the station, and fantasizing about how, if I survived this trip without a heatstroke and made it back to Budapest, I would go to my favorite Vietnamese restaurant straight from the station and gulp down a full pitcher of their cucumber water, possibly with a shot of vodka, just to punctuate the end of a bizarre day.

Finally, Réka came, and we could start the interview. She was an unexpectedly young, intelligent, soft-spoken, but clearly strong-willed woman. I was animated by how well the interview was going and how she expanded my knowledge of the fashion brands that were part of a Hungarian folk-revivalist trend. My first interviews for new projects tended to be more forgettable. Réka also loosened up by the end and even kept me company outside her home while I was waiting for the taxi, passionately telling me about the bogusness of the Finno-Ugric theory about Hungarians' ethnic origins, which is a popular revisionist trope on the populist right that I will explore in chapter 5.

It was only when I got into the taxi to head back to the train station that it finally dawned on me who the husband was: the "Whiskey Robber," Hungary's number one celebrity criminal!¹ The only criminal everyone in Hungary knows. A criminal whose life was being turned into a Hollywood-style gangster movie, slated to open in cinemas across Hungary that fall.² I had even watched the first trailer that came out just a week earlier. I almost laughed out loud in the taxi about how colossally dumb I was not to pay attention to his anecdotes and connect the dots. And now I understood why Attila seemed so amused by me. He probably couldn't honestly believe that I did not know who he was. The Whiskey Robber was a Robin Hood-type figure of the 1990s, an iconic character of the postcommunist transition, the first quintessentially capitalist criminal, a bank robber, a concept utterly useless under communism, as almost nobody would have bothered to rob a bank because money had surprisingly little value in life. The Whiskey Robber was a "gentleman robber" who brought flowers to the tellers, sent bottles of wine to the police, and acquired his nickname because he always downed a couple of shots of whiskey in a bar near the bank before embarking on his business. He was eventually caught after a long cat-and-mouse game with the police in 1999 but then escaped from prison using a rope cobbled together out of shredded sheets, electric cords, and shoelaces. After his recapture a couple of months later, he was sentenced to seventeen years in a maximum-security prison for thirty robberies. He was released early in 2012 for good behavior to start his life anew as a potter and an unlikely folk hero.³

By dwelling on this story, I am not trying to insinuate that today's radical nationalists are all somehow outlaws, even in the literal sense of the word. But an outlaw outlook on life is an important undercurrent to grassroots populist politics that is energized by anti-elite, anti-establishment, and anti-system sentiments. This encounter was also important because it was during this first interview trip that it became apparent to me the extent to which I

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would be out of my comfort zone during this research.⁴ For instance, I would have to interact with people and a milieu that I always painstakingly tried to avoid both in Hungary and in the United States, where the Hungarian diaspora has a reputation for being “quite right-wing”—often likened to Cuban Americans in Florida—as the last significant wave of Hungarian émigrés settled in the United States after the anticommunist revolution of 1956. I would also have to present myself to interviewees in a way I feel ambivalent about, not because I deliberately misrepresented myself and my intentions but because I would not reveal to them fully where I am coming from and what my political convictions are. And I would have to be prepared for awkward situations like when Réka offered me a small gift, a handbag with a Transylvanian pattern (of the famous Torockó region) from her new summer collection. I profusely protested but realized that I would deeply offend her and undermine my credibility if I didn’t take the gift. Likewise, as an urbanist, I was used to conducting research in large urban centers, but here it soon became clear that I would have to roam around the countryside to carry out my fieldwork. This really should not have struck me as a surprise because the return of radical nationalism in Hungary, like in many other countries, feeds on an urban-rural rift.⁵ The Hungarian manifestation of this is a deep social and cultural divide between Budapest and the rest of the country, between the (West-oriented, cosmopolitan and prosperous) metropolis and the (inward-looking and economically precarious) provinces.⁶

But it also became clear that talking to people like Réka in person in their familiar environments would be immensely informative and offer a unique perspective into why so many people welcomed the populist turn in Hungary after Viktor Orbán’s return to power in 2010. My experience in Esztergom immediately reminded me of Arlie Hochschild’s highly acclaimed book *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016). In it, through in-depth interviews and focus groups, Hochschild managed to capture the deep resentment about the perceived denial of the American Dream that animated Tea Party supporters in rural Louisiana and drove them to support Donald Trump in the 2016 elections.⁷ Her work underscored the importance of directly engaging with supporters of the populist right to discern their worldviews even when social scientists often feel reluctant to immerse themselves in such milieus and are generally more inclined to study progressive activists who tend to be more like them.⁸ The first interview for this book reassured me that a ground-up approach that took the views of populist sympathizers seriously would yield novel insights into the rise of popular support for the far-right even if it promised to be a bumpy ride.

Developing a better understanding of why more and more people across the world turn to far-right populist politics for answers to societal (and personal) problems seems particularly pressing, as we are witnessing a pronounced rightward shift in a growing number of countries. Far-right populist parties are not simply capturing an ever-larger share of the votes in general elections but have managed to form governments in such well-established liberal democracies as the United States, Italy, and the Netherlands. Far-right forces have come—and are projected to come—alarmingly close to capturing the government in a range of other countries, including France, Germany, Sweden, and Austria, while important democracies in the Global South such as in India or Argentina have also elected populist leaders.

Research on populism has prioritized the study of political parties, electoral politics, eroding democratic institutions, media, and political propaganda.⁹ By contrast, this book takes a different approach by examining populism as a cultural—not just a political—process that aims to reshape cultural identities through reimagining the nation and the meanings of cultural citizenship.¹⁰ It therefore emphasizes the role of cultural production, culture wars, consumer markets, and popular culture in accounting for the rise of far-right populism. It shows, in particular, how popular consumer culture can serve as a crucial vehicle for promoting new interpretations of national identity and circulating nationalist symbols, thereby fostering popular support for far-right radicalization.

Hungary is the focus of the book because this country has emerged as one of the most interesting and important cases to elucidate the dynamics and resilience of far-right populism, for three reasons. First, it has followed a dramatic backsliding trajectory, from being likely the most open and liberal state of the former Eastern Bloc in the 1990s to becoming the most firmly entrenched right-wing populist regime in the European Union. Second, the Hungarian case epitomizes a larger international trend: It demonstrates how radical nationalist discourse penetrates the public sphere and reconstitutes mainstream politics. This is a gradual process that has been affecting a broad range of countries, not just those that elected a far-right populist government. Hungary provides an ideological blueprint in this regard that has inspired populist political forces in many countries, from the United States to Israel. Finally, even though the far-right government was ousted in 2026, Hungary is still the country with the longest-serving democratically elected populist government in the world: Viktor Orbán's Fidesz won a landslide victory in the general elections in 2010 and a supermajority in this and three consecutive elections in 2014,

2018, and 2022. Its long reign offers important lessons about populism's deeper impact on political systems. The book traces key processes behind these seismic shifts in political culture while also offering more general lessons regarding the links between nationalism and far-right populism.

The rapid commodification of nationalist sentiments and the parallel growth of a vigorous cultural industry that supplies props for expressing and enacting radical nationalist identities were particularly salient developments in a postcommunist context. This book suggests that the emergence of cultural niche economies that rework the symbolic lexicon and material culture of national and ethnic identification has been an overlooked aspect of the rise of far-right populism. Cultural production and lifestyle practices, for instance, have provided a powerful instrument to revive and spread mythical history by making it attractive, tangible, accessible, and easy to circulate. This is why the book focuses on the intersections between markets and new forms of nationalism by looking at the manufacturing, design, and branding of radical nationalist products and lifestyle concepts. It argues that the increasing right-wing radicalization of politics and the expansion of "uncivil" publics have been aided by an expanding culture industry that effectively turns these attitudes into cultural commodities.

"Restoring the Nation to Greatness"

America's greatness, for instance, remained the dominant recurring theme in Donald Trump's 2024 election victory speech. He pledged to "restore America to greatness," to "unlock America's glorious destiny," "make America safe, strong, prosperous, powerful, and free again," "start by putting America first," which also means that "we wanna have borders" and "a strong and powerful military." Finally, he called on Americans "because together we can truly make America great again for all Americans."¹¹ Historically, such unabashed centering of the nation (and its superiority) in political discourse has been more of a trademark of European than of US politics. And this wasn't just Trump's sales pitch. The *New York Times* appeared on the day after the elections with an all-caps front-page headline that also spotlighted anxiety about America's self-image as a nation: "'Trump's America'—Victory Changes Nation's Sense of Itself."

America's growing preoccupation with its national destiny also confirms what has been a more general feature of far-right politics: the return of the nation as a powerful source of collective identity.¹² Far-right populist movements have in fact reinstated the nation as the ultimate symbol of political

unity and mobilization, vowing “to restore its greatness.” In his revealing book, *Empire of Resentment: Populism’s Toxic Embrace of Nationalism*, Lawrence Rosenthal contends that Trump’s election victory in 2016 was a watershed moment because it convinced “America’s right-wing populists to migrate ideologically—from the Tea Party’s free market fundamentalism to Trump’s anti-immigrant, America-First nationalism.”¹³ With this move, the Republican Party began to resemble the right-wing anti-immigrant parties of Europe, which have been wedded to an exclusionary doctrine of nationalism—an “othering nationalism”¹⁴—that scapegoats immigrants and refugees as the main obstacle to national prosperity, the harmful Other.¹⁵ These developments question American exceptionalism and imply increasing transatlantic convergence when it comes to the political repertoire of far-right populism. Hence, European experiences with far-right populist challenges offer clues that can shed light on populism’s prospects and everyday dynamics in the United States too. In fact, political scientists have singled out Hungary and its far-right leader, Viktor Orbán, as offering particularly instructive lessons for America.¹⁶

Nationalism seemed to decline in the United States and Europe after World War II, leading to waning scholarly interest in the topic.¹⁷ Even after 1989 the sudden resurgence of nationalism, triggered by the collapse of communism, was associated primarily with the dissolution of multiethnic communist states like Yugoslavia or the USSR.¹⁸ These flare-ups of ethnic nationalism were also believed to be contained to the “more backward” regions of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Central Asia that hadn’t quite moved beyond primordial understandings of nationalism. The post-1989 *Zeitgeist* was dominated instead by projections about “the end of history”: the untrammelled progression of liberal democracy and global multiculturalism, an interconnected and interdependent world where nationalism would remain an anomaly and be surpassed by transnationalism.¹⁹ The expansion of the European Union was a model project in this regard, although the tide began to turn after the 2004 accession of ten new countries. Soon, new forms of “toxic” and “othering” nationalism started making inroads into the public sphere and politics. The 2008 financial crisis exposed the shaky neoliberal underpinnings of globalization and sowed distrust in unfettered markets. But, ultimately, “it was the triple crises of 2015 (terror, financial, and refugee)—the attacks in France ranging from the attack on Charlie Hebdo to the Bataclan, the Greek debt crisis and the refugee crisis—that paved the way for the nationalist surge.”²⁰ As liberal political forces fully embraced cultural globalization and neoliberal markets, dismissing nation-states as anachronistic or even pathological,²¹ the

opportunity to “reimagine” the nation for the twenty-first century was left entirely to the emerging populist right.

Nationalism research has also been split into two main camps along theoretical lines. The “political” approach, on the one hand, focuses primarily on elites’ political projects and discursive practices. The “quotidian” approach, on the other hand, explores mundane lived experiences and sentiments of nonelites.²² The latter camp, probing “everyday” or “banal” nationalism, infused new vigor into nationalism studies in the past decades.²³ But, as it was established in reaction, and to some extent in opposition, to the political approach, it has remained largely disconnected from it.

This book is launched from a ground-up perspective informed by “banal” nationalism, but it also aims to bridge the binary conceptual division of the field by showing that elite and popular visions of the nation are dynamically interconnected. The Hungarian case demonstrates particularly forcefully how “political” and “quotidian” practices constantly intersect. Hungary’s far-right populist government recognized early on the political power of banal nationalism and made it its mission to enable, embrace, and legitimate (selected) vernacular histories and popular practices of nationalism. In chapter 4, for instance, I will elaborate how a state-sponsored extracurricular heritage tourism program for public school students becomes a vessel to channel popular radical nationalist symbols into public education. In chapter 5 I will discuss how amateur archeologists are facilitated by public funding and new institutions set up by the government to promote their revisionist histories of Hungarian ethnogenesis.

Reimagining the Nation Through Cultural Production in Populist Regimes

In his paradigm-shifting book that ushered in the “cultural turn” in nationalism research, Benedict Anderson proposed a constructivist notion of the nation as an “imagined political community.”²⁴ He posited that citizens of a nation-state could simply not rely on face-to-face interactions with most of their compatriots to affirm their commonality. Instead, they had to symbolically construct, that is, “imagine,” this national community. Cultural products played a crucial role in this process, most importantly, printed matter such as books and newspapers, maps, and museums, but also poetry, prose fiction, music, and plastic arts. And the new national communities became imaginable through a “half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a

technology of communication (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity.”²⁵

In other words, the rise of capitalism expanded markets where cultural products were exchanged and circulated. The book was in fact the “first modern style mass-produced industrial commodity” and together with newspapers (just an “extreme” form of a book) was instrumental in consolidating vernacular languages and creating unified fields of exchange and communication.²⁶ Print capitalism was thus largely responsible for generating the fundamental material forms and circuits of communication through which the national community could be effectively imagined.

Anderson’s principal aim was to explain the rise of nations and nationalism, so how national communities were sustained over time and how they continually needed to be reimagined received little notice in his work. Imagining and reimagining the nation is, nevertheless, a complex, historically contingent and multilayered process that takes place at different scales, with varying intensity, and through evolving technologies (e.g., social media). For instance, whereas the political and emotional sway of national communities diminished during the post-1989 spread of globalization, now a key objective of far-right populist regimes is to bring back a narrowly defined, anti-immigrant nation as the definitive foundation of collective belonging.

Cultural products and markets are central to imagining a national political community, as pointed out by Anderson, which makes cultural production a useful starting point for investigating how far-right populism strives to reimagine the nation. Sociological research on cultural production has revolved mainly around the study of classification and its links to social stratification, valuation and evaluation, representations, or cultural capital, and not so much around national identity and nationalism.²⁷ Studies that did examine the nexus between cultural production and nation building tended to prioritize the role of the state and cultural elites,²⁸ and this was emphatically true in the postcommunist context.²⁹

The sociology of culture has also long maintained a sharp split between a cultural production and a consumption perspective.³⁰ My aim, however, is to follow a more integrated approach that recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of cultural production, consumption, and reception.³¹ While cultural producers are my key informants in this book, the conversations I conducted with them always reinforced how cultural production is intertwined with consumption: Cultural objects like fashion are often coproduced with customers, especially for small brands with a cultural mission. Furthermore, cultural producers are themselves often consumers of their

own and similar products and invest significant effort in understanding and responding to their customers' needs.³² The insights of scholarship on subcultures that I build on similarly stress that participants frequently act as both producers and consumers of their subcultures. As I flesh out in chapter 3, the reason I draw predominantly on cultural producers' views is not that I consider consumers' perspective less relevant but that, in this work, I am more interested in cultural producers' agency in manufacturing and circulating identity narratives via consumer markets than in the ways in which consumers appropriate them.

But cultural production also highlights how cultural objects and markets intersect, which is especially important for capturing popular forms of nationalism. And cultural producers themselves are not always part of the cultural elite, as will be shown in the case of the owners and designers of small fashion labels featured in chapter 3, or the case of horseback archery aficionados who promote revisionist histories of Hungarians' ethnic origins in chapter 5. Their careers were often rooted in countercultural scenes and were motivated by strong antiestablishment, and specifically antistate, attitudes, which continued to influence their outlook and everyday practices even after they attained more mainstream recognition following the populist turn in 2010.

This is why the focus on cultural production helps to demonstrate that contemporary far-right populism is not a well-codified political ideology but a more fluid subculture in which expressive symbols, material objects, rituals, everyday consumption, and lifestyle patterns are essential carriers of political convictions and markers of group boundaries.³³ These symbolic economies also contribute to reconfiguring the boundaries between politics and the public sphere, allowing radical nationalist themes to penetrate mainstream political discourse. This occurs, for instance, because markets often successfully circulate radical nationalist symbols and narratives that are suppressed from official political vocabulary. These can include symbols that are not legally banned (unlike, for instance, the swastika in most European countries) but are nevertheless closely associated with radical nationalist politics, such as the irredentist Greater Hungary image in Hungary, or the tsar's portrait in Russia.³⁴ The visibility and legitimacy accorded to these symbols through their broad circulation on mundane consumer goods gradually helps to break down the barriers to the political mainstream and shift the boundaries of political acceptability. I also argue that this popular consumer culture has been eagerly mobilized by far-right populist governments in the culture wars in their efforts to establish an illiberal national cultural canon.

By taking the study of cultural production in this direction, I want to underline that the national is not confined to the political realm but increasingly extends into the economic. The imprint of nationalism and ethnicity on economic processes has been explored in a scattered manner across a range of disciplines, from international political economy to media and communications, addressing topics such as economic nationalism, ethnic enclaves, or nation branding. An extensive literature in international political economy originally defined economic nationalism through a set of economic policies, including trade protectionism, statism, and autarky, that were employed—and are about to be resurrected in many countries—to champion the economic interests of individual nations.³⁵

More recently, attention has been expanded to policy efforts that seek to protect and reassert distinct national cultures feared to be undermined by globalization and neoliberal free trade. For instance, the elaborate system of geographical indications that give producers of artisanal foodstuffs exclusive rights to product names in Europe (e.g., Roquefort cheese, Prosciutto di Parma, Scotch whiskey) serves to recognize and ensure “cultural sovereignty” by safeguarding national cultures and local traditions.³⁶ Sociologists and anthropologists have primarily focused on the economic significance of ethnicity: on the role of ethnic enclaves and ethnic niche economies as a vehicle for immigrant incorporation,³⁷ and on the turning of ethnic groups into business ventures.³⁸ Interest has also surged in the practice of nation branding, the commercialization of national distinctiveness and heritage in the context of globalization and neoliberal corporatization, usually involving state-led efforts to boost the national economy.³⁹

But these lines of inquiry do not quite capture the dynamics of cultural production that is driven by radical nationalism. Radical nationalist consumer culture has not emerged as a consequence of economic policy measures that sought to protect and promote the production and consumption of locally made national commodities.⁴⁰ It is also not a case of nation branding or corporatization of ethnicity as described, for instance, in *Ethnicity Inc.*,⁴¹ because national identity is not commodified chiefly for outsiders—tourists, foreign investors, or European Union bureaucrats—and for simulating national economic development. Instead, it relies on commodification and material culture to draw hard ethnic boundaries around national identity—even everyday clothing should display visible markers of Hungarianness. It is seen to offer tools for the cultural and political reimagining of the nation, which is part of a nation-building and sovereignty-affirming project that targets and mobilizes co-ethnics of the nation-state

and ethnic diaspora communities beyond state borders. Radical nationalist consumer tastes and consumption practices still operate as an exclusionary mechanism, not just against immigrants and minority ethnic groups such as the Roma or Jews, but also against liberals and social progressives who embrace “faceless” global multiculturalism and gender-inclusiveness while rejecting ethnic and national markers as anachronistic and politically retrograde.

The study of far-right populism’s cultural production conceptually benefits more from research on subcultures and “circuits of commerce.”⁴² Scholarship on subcultures emphasizes the significance of commodities and material culture as means of symbolic communication for social groups.⁴³ Clothing, language choice, music preferences, or leisure activities are politically meaningful. Consumer goods are mobilized as everyday material objects to define a “politics of style,” to express and perform group identity in opposition to mainstream society.

The grassroots and countercultural nature of subcultures carries important implications for contemporary radical nationalist consumer culture. The general assumption about far-right populist regimes is that their preferred cultural expressions are determined in a top-down manner by the state and a politically anointed cultural elite in line with their pronounced authoritarian outlook. In the following chapters, however, I will show how crucial the countercultural origins of radical nationalist cultural production are, and how it is this antiestablishment attitude that populist governments hope to embrace to bolster their popular appeal.

Although subcultural studies effectively capture the political power of mundane cultural objects, they were not much interested in nationalism, as they were searching instead for manifestations of class-based resistance.⁴⁴ Even right-wing and extremist youth cultures such as skinhead and neo-Nazi groups and their appropriation of fashion and clothing brands were mostly explained as forms of class resistance.⁴⁵ Similarly, youth cultures remain the analytical focus in this field,⁴⁶ even though, as the case study chapters will elaborate, radical nationalist subcultures cut across age, gender, and class affiliation.⁴⁷ My book moves away from the tendency to spotlight only the most radical and extreme fringe groups that signal right-wing political shifts and pursues the seemingly more moderate but potentially deeper transformations that also engulf the societal middle.

In a similar vein, research on “circuits of commerce” helps to illuminate the loosely connected social networks of radical nationalist consumerism while this example simultaneously helps to expand the theoretical scope

of this work. Viviana Zelizer coined the concept to describe how symbolic meanings that emerge through thick webs of social relations organize economic exchanges.⁴⁸ Economic circuits thus constitute a distinctive and widespread form of interaction. Producers and consumers of radical nationalism make up such an economic circuit because, for them, specialized commodities constitute a material culture that effectively carries shared understandings of national belonging and moral value.

Communities that emerge around radical nationalist consumer products and lifestyle practices thus indicate how political attitudes and commitments can also become the organizing principle of specialized economic transactions. This line of reasoning will be developed most fully in chapter 3, which looks at Hungarian folk-revivalist fashion brands. The other chapters will not only reinforce this argument but go a step further by showing how “circuits of commerce” in different fields—fashion, book publishing, horseback archery—are interconnected. They do not completely overlap but intersect in important ways, which contributes to scaling up radical nationalist cultural production and consumer communities. This scaling up intensifies after the formation of a far-right populist government that starts steering various forms of public support (e.g., financial subsidies, institutional recognition, increased visibility) toward their maintenance. The case studies in the following chapters will depict in detail how radical nationalist “cultural circuits” are integrated into mainstream cultural production with the aim of building a new national cultural canon, a key political aspiration of the far-right.⁴⁹

Struggle for a Right-Wing Cultural Hegemony and an Illiberal Cultural Canon

In a Tanner lecture delivered at the University of Michigan in 1988, Toni Morrison spoke about the “Afro-American Presence in American Literature” in the evolving culture wars at the time.⁵⁰ She sharply summarized the enormous stakes involved in canon debates: “Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested.”⁵¹ Her views convey the intensity of the debate about literary canons in the 1980s and 1990s, when a rising conservative movement began to vehemently question what was taught in the

humanities at US universities. They were particularly outraged by how feminism and multiculturalism criticized the classic Western canon in literature, art, and history for its racial, sexual, and political biases, urging revisions to the canon.⁵²

But culture wars were not limited to the humanities or universities. They encompassed a much wider array of US culture and politics, revealing a deepening fissure between traditionalists/conservatives and progressives/liberals over the fundamental cultural and moral values that were supposed to provide a compass to American society. Political battles erupted over cultural issues such as abortion, gun laws, separation of church and state, sexuality, family values, or privacy.⁵³ And, as noted by James Davison Hunter, a prominent theorist of the culture wars, at heart they were about the mobilization of political resources around competing positions on cultural issues, that is, about how culture underwrites politics. Culture wars thus usually expose how politics is rooted in deeper cultural dispositions beyond attitudes and values.⁵⁴ Yet, they have often been dismissed in political discourse, predominantly by the left, as just smoke and mirrors, as a mere distraction deflecting attention from “real” issues—as conflicts are always seen to boil down to “it’s the economy, stupid.” The contemporary populist far right has, however, taken culture very seriously and ascribed to it a central place in its political playbook.

The latest resurgence of culture wars in the United States echoes many of the themes and underlying tensions that were manifest in its previous incarnations: the questioning of progressive university curricula, now targeting critical race theory and LGBTQ+ content;⁵⁵ identity politics revolving around wokeness and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies; book bans over portrayals of sexual and racial identity in high schools and public libraries; or the high-profile Republican attacks on—and continuing threats to—universities in the wake of the Israeli-Hamas war. The current debates also highlight how political differences become increasingly entrenched and essentialized when they are defined around cultural and moral beliefs, exacerbating political polarization. Culture has clearly served as an important political battleground for the populist far right, which has fueled culture wars with the intention of disrupting the liberal cultural canon.

Culture wars have also played an important role for far-right populist movements in Europe. They are considered a means of working toward a right-wing cultural hegemony that is believed to be integral to solidifying and deepening political rule. The idea that culture is vital to a right-wing political breakthrough was formulated in the 1960s by one of the key thinkers

of the French New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*), Alain de Benoist. He introduced the concept of metapolitics to argue that to gain political influence, one had to move beyond conventional political strategies and recognize the primacy of culture over politics.⁵⁶ De Benoist derived this lesson from observing the events of 1968 and the ways in which they contributed to the emergence of the New Left. He noted how the countercultural fervor of leftist student radicals inspired by Marxist cultural theories spread to broader social strata, generating a deeper cultural shift that eventually enabled political mobilization and opened the way for political changes.⁵⁷

This conclusion led de Benoist to call for a right-wing reinterpretation of leftist cultural theorists, most importantly of Antonio Gramsci and his idea of cultural hegemony. In theorizing why communism failed to stop fascism in the interwar period, Gramsci developed his theory of cultural hegemony. He proposed that social order was maintained primarily through cultural domination and not coercion. Each political order is bolstered by a hegemonic ideology, “that is, a hegemonic system of ideologies that provide a common language, discourse, and normative visions shared by the contestants in struggle.”⁵⁸ Class struggle for Gramsci thus also takes place in the cultural realm where competing classes (labor and capital) vie for attaining hegemony. The dominated class, while mostly willingly consenting to the reigning cultural hegemony, has some insight into the nature of their domination, and “organic intellectuals” can devise ways to break the status quo.⁵⁹

So, even though the New Right started as an antileftist backlash against the cultural revolution of the 1960s, it was so impressed by the latter’s effectiveness that it vowed to mimic its tactics and “reconquer the cultural and intellectual terrain occupied by the left.”⁶⁰ Metapolitics in this scheme then becomes essentially synonymous with culture wars.⁶¹ This modus operandi is evident in the contemporary context when the far-right populist agenda frequently just involves “flipping the script” of the radical left. For instance, de Benoist introduced the notion of “ethnopluralism” as a response to multiculturalism, advocating a “differentialist anti-racism” that aims to uphold the irreducible ethnic and racial plurality of the human species.⁶² He maintains that racism should not be fought by negating the concept of race or by blending “all races into an undifferentiated whole,” but by respecting and preserving ethnic and racial distinctiveness.⁶³ His “ethnopluralism” therefore basically stands for “an upside-down multiculturalism that amounts to a coded nativism, translating xenophobia and intolerance into liberal-democratic universalist language.”⁶⁴

Identity politics is similarly turned on its head. Far-right populists have criticized leftist identity politics for a myriad of reasons: for fragmenting society in the name of an ever-increasing number of subgroup identities; for emphasizing victimhood; for rejecting Enlightenment universalism in the name of individualist politics, for favoring a “pseudo-politics of recognition” over redistribution.⁶⁵ Yet, they appropriate the language of identity by turning it into a metaconcept of itself, which they call “identitarianism.” For far-right populists, identity is “a bulwark against globalism, multiculturalism, and what they label the ‘great replacement’ (an anti-immigrant conspiracy theory).”⁶⁶ It is mobilized against pluralism and difference, and it aims to reroot the “people” in an essentialist and ethnically homogeneous—in German often denoted as *völkisch*—community that embraces white supremacy and, in the case of the United States, also a white Christian nationalism.⁶⁷ The ideological mirroring used in the case of ethnopluralism and identity politics is one of the far right’s underlying strategies to undermine the cultural hegemony of liberalism.

The French New Right grew into the European New Right and has exerted considerable influence over the development of far-right populism across Europe since the 1990s, most significantly in Italy, Germany, and Belgium, but also in Russia (through the work of Alexander Dugin). The American Alt-Right and the pan-European “Identitarian” movement also claim to have been inspired by the ideas of the New Right.⁶⁸ In Hungary, too, the European New Right left an important mark. De Benoist’s ideas about right-wing Gramscism and metapolitics have been the most influential in shaping Hungarian thinking about the role of culture in far-right populist rule. They have been adapted to Hungarian circumstances and further developed into a “metapolitical” plan of action for the Orbán regime.

The most important local interpreter of the New Right’s ideological framework is a young historian, Márton Békés, who is the research director of The House of Terror Museum in Budapest—dedicated to commemorating the crimes of both fascist and communist regimes in Hungary—and the director of the XXIst Century Institute—a conservative think tank that is made up of “a community of thinkers committed to national sovereignty, democracy, freedom, market economy and Christian values.”⁶⁹ He is also an important protégé of Mária Schmidt, director-general of the museum, a Holocaust historian, but also one of the richest Hungarians.⁷⁰ Schmidt has been part of Viktor Orbán’s inner circle for decades and served as Orbán’s main adviser during the first Fidesz government from 1998 to 2002.

Consequently, the Hungarian interpretation of the New Right's vision of culture as a political resource was synthesized by Békés in *Cultural Warfare: The Theory and Practice of Cultural Power*, published in 2020. This book has served as a written manifesto that makes explicit the Orbán regime's political objectives in the field of culture, and for this reason it warrants closer examination here.⁷¹ As the title suggests, it promises to lay not only the ideological foundations but also a strategic roadmap for establishing a right-wing cultural hegemony in Hungary. It asserts that replacing the liberal with an illiberal cultural canon was an absolute necessity because even though Hungary had a supermajority right-wing government since 2010, in the cultural sphere this government could not even get 10 percent of the votes.⁷² Dismantling the liberal cultural hegemony is particularly challenging because it still represents the global *Zeitgeist*, which means that the (re)production of local culture has to compete with the vast arsenal of tools and resources available for the production of global culture. Therefore, the state had to assume an active role in compensating for this power differential between the conditions of local and global cultural production in the interest of protecting national sovereignty.

An illiberal cultural hegemony is also portrayed as indispensable because the Orbán government's political aspiration went beyond building just a new political system; it wanted to define an entire era (*korszak*). This was a central idea that debuted in one of Viktor Orbán's (in)famous speeches delivered each year at a summer free university in Transylvania, Romania.⁷³ In his 2018 speech, Orbán announced that Fidesz's third supermajority election win could be understood as a mandate for his government "to build a new era." He explained that "an era, however, is more than a political order. An era is a distinctive and representative cultural milieu. An era is a kind of intellectual order, a shared mood, possibly a characteristic taste and mode of conduct. A system, a political system is usually defined by rules and political decisions, but an era is more than this. An era, instead, is defined by cultural trends, collective beliefs, and societal customs. Our task now is to embed the political system in a cultural era."⁷⁴ In other words, an epochal transformation requires something deeper than just political change, it needs to shift society's shared cultural and cognitive frames. And without an all-embracing cultural change, a political regime change remains incomplete and can be easily reversed.⁷⁵ In this context, culture wars become the key (metapolitical) tool in the struggle for cultural hegemony, which is in fact a war for cultural power.

The objective is a “conservative cultural decolonization,” which requires the deconstruction of the deeply ingrained and globally backed liberal cultural canon.⁷⁶ In the Hungarian case, this is presented as uniquely difficult because from a cultural standpoint, the far right sees the postcommunist period until 2010 as the extension of the communist era. According to this position, the leftist political and economic elite of late communism struck an alliance with the liberal intelligentsia that grew out of the democratic opposition to secure their control over the postcommunist transition. Even though political power slipped from their hands a couple of times when they lost the elections (1990–1994, 1998–2002), they firmly held onto cultural power during the entire period. By this right-wing theorists mean that the post-1989 continuity in the individuals and families that made up the country’s power and economic elite enabled these groups to maintain their cultural monopoly not just over cultural production but also over cognitive and discursive frames, structures of thought, and language use.⁷⁷ And, as mentioned earlier, they were also facilitated in this process by adapting and confirming to the expectations of global (neoliberal) power structures.

How to crack this deeply entrenched cultural monopoly became a major dilemma for Fidesz after its 2010 landslide election victory. The proposed action plan was not as elaborate as the diagnosis of the intricacies of liberal domination, but Békés put forward a bundle of suggestions for practical intervention in his capacity as an aspiring ideologue. He contends that Gramscian consent to power is achieved through culture embodied in myths, symbols, narratives, shared history, canon and legitimation, which circulate via institutions of public life (civic associations, forums, events, media, and organizations).⁷⁸

On a more operational level, Békés emphasizes the importance of establishing new institutions that incubate illiberal cultural production and organizing them into close-knit networks. Fidesz’s strategy has in fact involved setting up so-called parallel institutions, that is, duplicating existing public research institutes by opening a conservative version—a trend that will be explored further in chapter 2. This again illustrates the ideological mirroring that is a general feature of the far right’s cultural strategy. Békés takes stock of this strategy a few years after the publication of his manifesto, noting that by 2023 eight new institutes were set up in the field of historical research and memory politics, seven conservative think tanks, three policy research institutes in support of governmental agencies, a journal, half a dozen quality publishers, and two or three nonprofit foundations that function as umbrella organizations.⁷⁹ New institutions have mushroomed hand

in hand with sustained attacks on existing ones, most notably on the Central European University, which was pressured to leave Hungary, on the research network of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and on major Hungarian universities, whose autonomy was severely curbed by being coerced into a new governance model that reduces public funding while simultaneously increasing direct government control.⁸⁰

In conjunction with the institutional strategy, a “three-level counter-hegemony machinery” is proposed. Level 1 involves “direct combat” on a day-to-day basis through daily and weekly papers, television and radio programs, and various internet platforms. Level 2 is responsible for “mid-term cultural work” with the help of monthly and quarterly journals, books, research institutes, and think tanks. Books, for instance, are described as a “weapon” and reading as a “military act.” Level 3 deals with articulating the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the right-wing worldview through university lectures, book publishers, and film distributors, among others.⁸¹ The important role these tools have played in Germany in the rise of the far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is frequently highlighted.⁸² These three levels provide the institutional infrastructure for the circulation of political discourse, which is essentially “made up of an intricate web of myths, tales, stories, testimonials, i.e., narratives and the grand narratives (that we call metanarratives).”⁸³ Discursive strategies and the politics of language are crucial because they can eventually lead to discursive domination, the ability to define the terms and the language of political discourse, which is the first step toward cultural hegemony.

It’s also true, however, that narratives are given special attention as the basis of metapolitical strategies for the right. Narratives are seen as a “collective, cognitive resource” that creates a strong emotional pull and can take many forms, including legends, myths, traditions, and oral histories. Political conflicts then often unfold as a clash of narratives between warring political groups, and narrative advantage can be converted into political advantage.⁸⁴ The centrality of narratives resonates with Arlie Hochschild’s findings about “deep stories” in the right-wing communities she studied in the United States.⁸⁵ These “deep stories” are deep because they have been told and retold over many times across generations, tweaked and updated to contemporary circumstances. In the Hungarian case, many of these narratives revolve around mythical histories about the nation, which will be scrutinized more closely in the remaining chapters.

I also argue, however, that how narratives circulate and are reproduced in the process is as crucial as their periodic retelling. The following chapters

will therefore trace how the same narrative (e.g., mythical national origin stories) can be re-created and disseminated simultaneously in multiple forms as cultural objects (e.g., books, clothing, traditional sport, heritage tours) and how this multiplicity amplifies their prevalence.

Most theorists of the New Right clearly write from the perspective of the cultural and intellectual elite and say precious little about the role of popular culture in the struggle for illiberal cultural hegemony. My book in turn will also shed light on how popular culture is mobilized in this process—for instance, by promoting a grassroots revisionist historiography (chapter 2), folk-revival in fashion (chapter 3), vernacular histories in public education (chapter 4), and amateur archeology and anti-Westernism (chapter 5)—and is embraced by the state in various ways to boost the regime’s popular legitimacy. Popular culture also underscores the importance of consumer markets—overlooked in the elitist view—as important infrastructure for the circulation of identity narratives.

It is crucial to stress the countercultural attitude that continues to characterize both the elite and popular cultural producers of the populist far right. As, for example, the interviews in chapter 2 on book publishing will reveal, even cultural producers who have assumed powerful positions since the populist turn in 2010 persistently see themselves under the shadow of a lingering liberal cultural hegemony as marginalized actors in the cultural field. Therefore, their strategies and self-understandings are still very much driven by countercultural, counter-establishment narratives and frames of mind.

The Conceptual Minefield of Populism

“Populism” has become a ubiquitous yet slippery term, tangled up with a range of heavyweight concepts like nationalism, extremism, radicalism, fascism, or illiberalism.⁸⁶ There is some academic consensus that populism denotes a type of politics that is organized around the antagonism between “the elite” and the “people,” claiming to redefine political rule in the name of the “people.”⁸⁷ It can characterize both left- and right-wing politics, although most recently it has been primarily used to describe illiberal, antidemocratic, and antipluralist political trends. Populism is also no longer a fringe phenomenon of liberal democracies but has become mainstream, increasingly giving way to a “populist *Zeitgeist*.”⁸⁸

The question is still, nevertheless, whether it can be considered a well-defined ideology like other major “isms,” such as communism, liberalism, nationalism, and capitalism, or rather a political movement, or simply a

political style. An influential theorist of populism, political scientist Cas Mudde, defines populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”⁸⁹ Populism’s core revolves around the notion of “the people,” and its “thin-centeredness” means, for instance, that it can be readily combined with other ideologies, from communism to nationalism to ecologism.⁹⁰ The combination of populism with nationalism has certainly been on the rise, seeking to reroot “the will of the people” in a narrowly defined, ethnically homogeneous community, and will be the focus of this book as well.

Additional perplexity arises from the proliferation of qualifiers and synonyms associated with populist politics, including far right, hard right, extreme right, radical right, as well as national conservative, nativist, anti-immigrant, neofascist, authoritarian, and any possible combinations of these (and some other) terms.⁹¹ There is even a large-scale, international research project, The PopuList, that follows the changing evolution and use of these terms to identify political parties in thirty-one countries over a roughly thirty-year period, from 1989 to 2022. According to this classification, radical right parties, for instance, are distinguished by two core ideologies: nativism (a strong anti-immigrant stance espousing that only members of the “native group” should inhabit the state) and authoritarianism (a centralized, hierarchical rule focusing on the maintenance of order). Extreme-right parties share these ideological foundations but also question and want to overthrow the existing democratic order while approving the use of violence, like Greece’s neo-Nazi Golden Dawn.

The far right, in turn, is more of an umbrella label that encompasses both radical and extreme-right parties.⁹² “Hard right” has come into vogue recently and is used predominantly by media outlets. These criteria can help differentiate the ideological platforms of specific parties. Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (RN) in France classifies as a far-right, populist party, the German AfD is a far-right, populist party that has an extremist element, while Hungary’s Fidesz is also a far-right, populist party with strong anti-LGBTQ+ views.⁹³ This lexicon, nevertheless, still focuses narrowly on categorizing political parties rather than capturing the broader societal implications of populism as an emergent political order.

Simultaneously, there are strong voices insisting that populism is just a euphemistic label to sugarcoat the contemporary resurgence of fascism.⁹⁴ They contend that populist politics employs many of the same tactics and

rhetorical techniques that fascist movements turned to in the interwar period, such as directing hatred against immigrants and minorities (e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals), undermining the independence of the judicial system, suggesting that violent vigilante justice against political opponents is acceptable, banning books, and “using education to indoctrinate the young in the narrative of national greatness, rooted in a glorious past.”⁹⁵

Erasing a pluralist history that includes the perspectives of marginalized groups—reflected in attacks on critical race theory or in denials of slavery’s central role in the United States—and replacing it with a single version of the past that preaches national greatness, purity, and innocence while reinforcing strict gender roles and demonizing the left are as essential to contemporary populist representations and practices as they were to their fascist counterparts. The political purpose of this erasure is to justify the reproduction of social and cultural hierarchies that place one group above others based on arbitrary factors like race, ethnicity, and gender.⁹⁶ Education then serves as a key site where these distorted histories are disseminated in the form of mythic representations that create and sustain an emotionally charged sense of victimhood and resentment. Sources of victimhood and resentment can vary greatly across countries—resentment over the perceived denial of the American Dream in the United States,⁹⁷ or over unjust treatment by foreign powers in the case of Hungary—but they are as much a key mover of populist politics as they were during fascism.⁹⁸ Any critical scholarship that questions these one-dimensional narratives is seen as a political threat, hence the repeated assaults on universities in populist regimes from Trump’s America and Orbán’s Hungary to Modi’s India.

There are certainly eerie similarities in the political goals and tactical repertoire of fascism and today’s populism, as highlighted by the examples in the previous paragraph. But creating a simple equivalence between interwar fascist and contemporary populist movements not only would be ahistorical but would not necessarily enhance our understanding of current developments. Authors who warn against the ominous dangers of populism by invoking the specter of fascism often do this to maximize indignation and moral repugnance. They tend to write more from an engaged activist than from a scholarly perspective.⁹⁹ As a result, they often slip into generalizations that turn “fascist” into a catch-all term, a synonym for authoritarian, extremist, repressive, xenophobic, ethnocentric, nationalist—that is, virtually any manifestation of antidemocratic politics.¹⁰⁰ This becomes especially problematic in a postcommunist context because many of the practices ascribed to fascist politics (e.g., propagation of distorted histories in public

education, censorship, book bans, use of state violence against dissenters) were also routinely employed by communist regimes, and thus not specific to fascism. They also tend to downplay important differences, for instance, the centrality of organized militia violence under the aegis of an electoral party that was at the heart of fascist politics.¹⁰¹ Hence, in this book I prefer to follow a strategy that does not assume some inherent link between fascism and populism but focuses instead on empirically tracing links to the fascist era and its contemporary implications (e.g., the interwar fascist cooptation of folk symbolism in Hungarian fashion, or the lifting of interwar authors that advocated fascist views into the National Core Curriculum in literature after 2010).

Illiberalism is yet another term that has a firm place in the thick web of concepts closely interrelated with populism. It has also been an emergent and fluid concept that academia has for long evaded using while it rose to prevalence in media and political discourse.¹⁰² It generally signifies the broad backlash against liberal principles such as pluralism, individual freedoms, universalism, and equality that entailed support, for instance, for human rights, protection of minorities, or ethnic, gender, and religious diversity. Illiberalism, by contrast, promotes intolerance, fear of difference, discipline, respect for hierarchy, authority, traditions, and “organic” collectives such as the family.¹⁰³ It was introduced by Fareed Zakaria in a *Foreign Affairs* piece that described illiberal democracies as regimes that have free elections but lack liberal institutions.¹⁰⁴ But its career as a concept tied to populism was really launched by Viktor Orbán in his “illiberal state” speech in 2014. Orbán lambasted liberalism for fostering “individual selfishness and rootless cosmopolitanism, creating a society of atomized and multicultural citizens who claim rights without accepting any duties to the national community and state.”¹⁰⁵ Instead, he envisioned a “work-based” society governed by majoritarianism and strong conservative values. He also pointed to the “Asian model,” predominantly Singapore and China besides Turkey and Russia, to note that liberal democracy is not the only political system that can generate economic growth.¹⁰⁶ This is an important theme whose popular cultural underpinnings will be examined in chapter 5.

Against this overview of the terminologically overlaid terrain of populism research that aimed to clarify fundamental concepts, I want to explain the terminological choices I made for this book. I will primarily use three terms to denote different aspects of populist politics: radical nationalism, far-right populism, and illiberalism. I use radical nationalism when I want to emphasize the countercultural roots of right-wing populism. In a

postcommunist setting, nationalism and its radical expressions were seen as a form of political resistance to the internationalism of the communist and the global multiculturalism of post-1989 liberal democratic regimes. In fact, Hungarian right-wing movements in the 2000s, before the 2010 populist turn, often called themselves *nemzeti radikálisok*, which is difficult to precisely translate into English but would be closest in meaning to “national radicals,” recalling nineteenth-century political movements fighting for national self-determination.¹⁰⁷ By using far-right populism, I draw on Cas Mudde’s classification discussed earlier, opting for this umbrella term that includes both radical and extreme right-wing political movements to situate Hungarian right-wing actors and developments vis-à-vis larger international trends.¹⁰⁸ Finally, illiberalism and illiberal refer to the cultural content, the cultural products and practices that promote illiberal values (e.g., intolerance, traditional values, heteronormative gender norms, majoritarianism), as outlined earlier.

Organization of the Book

The ensuing chapters explore four crucial and representative sites of radical nationalist consumer culture that have significantly shaped far-right populist cultural production in Hungary since the early 2000s: *book publishing* that has been central to today’s culture wars, a defining element of far-right populist politics in and of itself; *fashion brands* that design and market explicitly national fashion items rooted in folk traditions; *heritage tourism* to neighboring countries (especially to Transylvania, Romania) to show how cross-border tourism strives to symbolically transgress current national borders and sustain the idea of a “Greater Hungary”; and *martial arts*, exemplified by horseback archery, that claim to recover “ancient” nomadic traditions embedded in a mythic Orientalism and a broader ideological mission of anti-Westernism.

These four case studies each illuminate different but fundamental aspects of far-right cultural production: book publishing focuses on culture wars, fashion zooms in on the formation of political “circuits of commerce,” heritage tourism reveals how mythical historical narratives are propagated in public schools, and horseback archery exposes the deep roots of anti-Westernism as integral to populist illiberalism in Hungary. The analysis employs mixed-methods qualitative research building on a combination of interviews with various cultural professionals (e.g., fashion designers, craftspeople, curators, design consultants, book publishers); ethnographic observations at festivals,

fairs, exhibitions, fashion shows, horseback archery camps; and the content analysis of documents, company websites, and social media platforms of key cultural producers (e.g., fashion brands, book publishers).

Chapter 2 examines the political weaponization of books and book publishing through the so-called national book publishers and bookstores and the spread of book bans. In the age of social media, books are believed to have lost their relevance in political discourse. But the striking proliferation of book bans—in the United States in 2024 there were over ten thousand instances of banned books in public schools¹⁰⁹—reminds us of the unabating political influence of books and enduring censorship. Book publishing has also been identified as a strategic field by the European New Right, which affirms the precedence of culture over politics in achieving a right-wing breakthrough, urging the building of a right-wing cultural hegemony in the spirit of a “right-wing Gramscism.”¹¹⁰

A group of boutique publishing houses and independent bookstores make up a significant niche market in the Hungarian publishing industry, specializing in nationalist fiction and nonfiction. Incidentally, the world’s largest English-language publisher of far-right authors, Arktos, is also headquartered in Budapest. Chapter 2 maps how the mainstreaming of these right-wing publishers and normalization of far-right literature have proceeded hand in hand with the banning of books that contain LGBTQ+ content to mark out the contours of a new illiberal cultural canon.

Some “national” publishing houses, such as the family-owned Püski, trace their origins to interwar era fascist politics. Püski also operated in exile in New York City for nearly three decades after World War II, serving the Hungarian diaspora in the United States before returning to Hungary after 1989. These publishers were essential in keeping in circulation nationalist and far-right authors and literature that were banned under communism. Samizdat literature also included conservative and far-right writers who were compromised during interwar fascism and were outlawed by communist governments. Demand for these works grew exponentially after the fall of communism, which these publishers were quick to meet while extending their lists to new genres, including esoteric nationalism, speculative and mythical Hungarian origin histories, “traditional” martial arts such as horseback archery, and translations of the work of Western European far-right ideologues (e.g., Jean Raspail, Alan de Benoist).

Formerly blacklisted far-right Hungarian authors (e.g., Albert Wass, Cécile Tormay¹¹¹) have been lifted into the national public-school curriculum, while contemporary progressive fiction that engages with the

complexities of gender and sexual identity has been banned and declared harmful for children. I draw on interviews with owners of publishing houses, recurring visits to specialized bookstores, debates over the national curriculum and LGBTQ+ books for children, as well as company websites and social media materials to explain how books and book publishing shape far-right politics.

Chapter 3 focuses on fashion, which has historically been an important tool for expressing, enacting, and promoting national distinctiveness in Hungary. Similar to other countries, whose political independence was repeatedly challenged, political causes like national self-determination were often fought by cultural means, such as fashion.¹¹² Recent international examples—ranging from niqab and burkini bans in France and several other European Union states to the infamous burka vs. bikini ads of Germany's AfD party in the 2017 election campaign—similarly expose how dress and fashion constitute a crucial site where intense political conflicts over cultural belonging play out today.¹¹³

Chapter 3 highlights how, in Hungary, cultural heritage defined around ethnonational identity becomes politically instrumentalized, and how the communist regime's treatment of folk culture has facilitated its exploitation by far-right populist politics. I build primarily on interviews with fashion designers and owners of small labels (almost exclusively women), whose mission consists of incorporating "traditional" Hungarian motifs into contemporary everyday wear. Interviews with museum textile curators and fashion experts and ethnographic observations from numerous market fairs, exhibitions, and fashion shows complement the data.

These fashion producers, in addition to their commitment to local production and a craftsman ethic, promote the recovery of cultural heritage that emphasizes the reach of Hungarian ethnic culture beyond current state borders. They aim to revive and symbolically reclaim the aesthetic vocabulary of regions and territories that were detached from Hungary in 1920 because of the Treaty of Trianon and ceded to neighboring countries.¹¹⁴ They also build on the countercultural legacies of dissident popular social movements like the Dance House movement, a grassroots folk revival movement that began openly challenging official communist cultural policies in the 1970s.¹¹⁵ This movement was instrumental in creating demand for nationally inspired clothing that was not simply a traditional folk costume but incorporated folk culture into modern, urban everyday wear. Members of these movements—describing themselves as the "nomadic generation"—upheld national and ethnic folk heritage against what they saw as bogus communist

internationalism propagated within the Eastern Block and strictly enforced by the communist Hungarian government. These countercultural roots continue to endow these fashion brands with a subcultural, antiestablishment edginess.

Chapter 4 delves into heritage tourism as a means to question existing national borders and restore an imperial vision of the nation. It examines a large-scale, state-sponsored student travel program that the Hungarian government launched in 2010, the year that marked the start of a brisk populist turn in Hungarian politics. The program, named “Without Borders” (*Határ-talanul*), sponsors organized class trips of middle school students to areas of neighboring countries (Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Croatia, and Ukraine) that belonged to the Hungarian state before World War I. The program’s objective is to have thirteen-year-old school students visit Hungarian heritage sites in these countries to make them aware of the “real,” pre-World War I borders of a “Greater Hungary.” I obtained extensive and unique data about the travel scheme from the Hungarian Ministry of Human Resources through an extremely arduous Freedom of Information Act request.¹¹⁶ The content analysis of these textual and visual materials offers insight into how ethnic diaspora communities become the cornerstone of a new populist understanding of the nation.

The chapter shows that the ultimate political goal of the program is to foster a chauvinistic and exclusionary ethnic definition of national belonging while symbolically reappropriating the former territories of imperial Hungary. It aims to instill the idea in public school students that ethnic Hungarian minorities beyond the state border should be viewed as part of an ethnically homogeneous Hungarian nation, and their habitat as part of Hungary’s past and present. Additionally, the Hungarian government views state subsidies for heritage tourism as an important way to support Hungarian ethnic enclave economies in neighboring countries, as they contribute to the economic security and overall stability of these minority communities. The analysis sheds light on how the government exploits heritage tourism’s informal and experiential character as well as its performative and affective power to institutionally validate vernacular histories of radical nationalism.

Chapter 5 investigates a martial art form, horseback archery that has been invented as a competitive sport in the past decades. Its objective is to recover a horseback archery tradition rooted in the classic warfare of Hungarian nomadic tribes that settled in the Carpathian Basin (encompassing today’s Hungary) in the ninth century and brought this warfare with them on their long migratory journey from Central Asia. This chapter asserts that

modern-day horseback archery successfully taps into the popular culture of mythic Orientalism, which has a long tradition in Hungary and is a key source of anti-Westernism. It has been embraced by the far-right populist government after 2010 because it provides popular backing to its crusade against Western liberalism and the European Union and its opening to Eastern autocratic regimes like Russia and Turkey.

Horseback archery has a long mythical history: It is described as warfare that provoked intensive fear in Western Europeans in the early Middle Ages and is often used to “prove” Hungarians’ kinship with the Huns. This new martial art form has spawned a large following, while horseback archery shows have become a staple in local and national public holiday celebrations. Horseback archery requires lengthy training, extensive special equipment (bows, arrows, arrow quivers, special saddles, and other accessories), and handcrafted attire, while membership in sports clubs and competitions is fee based. There are also different strands emphasizing the sport, cultural heritage, or lifestyle aspects of horseback archery. Additionally, it has inspired an amateur archeology movement that aims to rewrite the history of Hungarian ethnogenesis.

The chapter is based on ethnographic data I collected by attending open days, competitions, trainings, and horse shows at the largest horseback archery camps in Hungary, as well as by visiting festivals like *Kurultáj*, a tribal assembly of the Hun-Turkic nations that takes place in eastern Hungary in the Hungarian *Puszta*, a steppe landscape with some of the largest sand dunes in Europe. *Kurultáj* is a high-profile, international three-day event—advertised as the largest cultural heritage festival in Europe—organized every two years in which horseback archery competitions and reenactment battles take center stage while the event also hosts a large market fair. My ethnographic observations are combined with interviews with horseback archers and craftsmen who manufacture horseback archery equipment and are partially gleaned from the social media feeds of key sports clubs. Horseback archery promotes deeply conservative views of masculinity, discipline, and community through stylized violence. But, above all, it locates Hungarians in a geopolitical kinship discourse, which asserts that Hungarians’ true cultural kin are not to be found in Western Europe but in Central Asia, and that Hungary must look to the East for cultural and spiritual values as opposed to clinging to a decadent and morally declining West.

This book tries to carefully situate Hungary in international developments and current theoretical debates by incorporating multiple comparative examples throughout the text. Yet, it is ultimately an intensive

fieldwork-based, in-depth case study of a single country, and its strengths lie in drawing out some of the sociological configurations that are particular to Hungary. As such, its broader objective is not to pinpoint causal regularities that can be readily generalized to other countries but to offer a more nuanced picture, an insider's view, of the dynamics between cultural production and far-right populism that complicates existing representations of far-right populist rule that often fall back on clichéd and one-dimensional accounts.

At the same time, the book does more than just argue that everything is “more complicated” when it comes to the culture of far-right populism on the ground. Most important, it calls for a wider and more systematic scrutiny of cultural producers as agents of spreading far-right populism. But it also identifies some general mechanisms that point beyond the Hungarian case. First, it captures the interplay between grassroots popular cultural advocacy and mainstream political embrace of far-right populism. Second, it delineates how far-right cultural production is scaled up and amplified through intersecting “circuits of commerce” and multiple channels of circulation. Third, it highlights how far-right populism presents an opportunity for geopolitical reorientation fueled by anti-Westernism. How these mechanisms evolve and apply to other cases will be spelled out in the conclusion.

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