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Pet, Andea

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FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

TAGESPOLITIK

Without Remedy: Lessons Learned from a Gendered Analysis of the 2018 Hungarian General Elections

ANDREA PETŐ

One could ask: What was that feminist colleague thinking when she announced in 2018 that she wanted to join a new Facebook group, called "Feminism of the Hungarian Sociological Association" (FHSA)? The new group included two administrators whom that same self-declared feminist scholar had previously 'blocked' as friends. This was the question that the group administrators FHSA actually asked themselves, when that ostensibly fierce, fearless and dedicated feminist activist submitted her request to join the new site – after she had already played a key role in trolling and destroying the oldest, most visited professional Facebook page called "Gender Studies in Hungary". The latter group had served as the most important infrastructure for feminist activism and teaching in recent years when public space and funding began shrinking considerably. In 2017, the Hungarian community of scholars and activists were shaken by several events that were long in coming, which pointed at serious political challenges that feminist politics now face.

At first glance, the inner turmoil witnessed in virtual space around who could ban and exclude whom from a closed, professional Facebook group may have had nothing to do with the results of three consecutive elections in Hungary. The Fidesz Magyar Polgári Szövetség (FIDESZ) party, in coalition with the Christian Democratic Party (Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt/KDNP), won all three, starting in 2010. In 2018, they increased their electoral support by an additional 440.000 votes. Significantly, this victory occurred even though the FIDESZ-KDNP government has been under international pressure for dismantling the rule of law, undermining the freedom of press, restricting women's rights, and mismanaging European Union (EU) funds, among other concerns (Pető 2017a). The government was nonetheless able to use the critique it encountered received abroad to its own advantage in the domestic arena where votes matter. These parties utilized external criticisms to justify an intensification of government rhetoric, claiming that Brussels, migrants and György Soros have waged a war against Hungary while illegitimately interfering in its domestic affairs. While opposition activists gave interviews to the foreign press, participated in hearings and attended informal dinners abroad, FIDESZ used government funding to mobilize voters in the countryside, often by distributing campaign donations or pressuring citizens to vote for its incumbents. In contrast to mainstream views, I argue that it is crucial to examine the strategies behind FIDESZ's consecutive victo-

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ries and to trace their connection with the virtual hurricane that destroyed the oldest, largest Hungarian-speaking Facebook group of gender scholars and activists. What does the collapse of the only professional gender studies Facebook venue tell us about the situation and limitations of feminist politics in Hungary, at a time when such politics are desperately needed? Feminists fought their battles on Facebook, using the weapons of unfriending, exclusion, and blocking. For many, the virtual closed space turned into a substitute for real, face-to face debates and political activism on the ground. This battle came to symbolize the same political crisis that led to FIDESZ's third electoral victory.

The Illiberal Polypore State

The current predicament of progressive politics, and that, the crisis of feminist political activism, can be traced back to multiple factors. This article discusses only one of them – new state formation and the novel quality of governance that the FIDESZ-KDNP has established in recent years. Political scientists are still arguing over whether the current ruling system should be characterized as "democratic authoritarianism," the "illiberal state," or as a "mafia state". Together with the Polish sociologist Weronika Grzebalska I have suggested applying the term "polypore state" (Grzebalska/Pető 2016).

The polypore is a parasitic pore fungus that lives on wood and produces nothing but further polypores. Our article defined three functional characteristics of the polypore state, all of which are gendered (ibd.; Grzebalska/Pető 2018). First, these characteristics are weakly represented or else are missing from traditional political analyses, much less considered in the opposition's electoral strategies. Still, all three are of key importance in understanding FIDESZ's third electoral victory, following a campaign during which the opposition could barely reach voters outside of Budapest; nor did their messages respond to the electorate's everyday problems. Secondly, they help to explain the reasons behind the desperate activities typical of Hungarian opposition politics today, exemplified by virtual actions, such as interviews and Facebook posts. Third, they aid us in comprehending why the opposition remain incapable of processing the real reasons behind their electoral defeat; instead they resort to blaming misled and manipulated voters. The self-destructive, virtual fights among Hungarian feminists on Facebook offers but one sign of this predicament.

One crucial feature of the polypore state involves *the establishment of a parallel, state-financed sphere of non-governmental organizations* (NGOs). The polypore state finances NGOs that appear to have the same or similar goals as the other human rights organizations that have been established since the regime change that took place after 1989 that concentrated on: the gender-equal balancing of family and work, the reintegration of mothers into the job market, assistance for mothers with small children. However, the ideological framing now is entirely different. To receive government financial support, these NGOs must display unfailingly loyalty

both to the government and to the patriarchal system it represents. In other words, they cannot challenge either the patriarchal political system, its institutions or its agents. As a result, the Hungarian government can present a busy, flourishing NGO sphere to the fact-finding members of the European Parliament, or to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee; EP/Noichl 2018); in the meantime, monetary sources have completely dried up for all but a few, „non-loyal" NGOs and activists. For NGO-ized Hungarian feminists who have lived from project to project, this move amounts to a death blow: Their livelihoods have been wiped out, and entire offices have been shut down. Literally, „spaces" for NGOs that are not loyal to the state have ceased to exist. The expertise and networks that required decades to build have gradually lost their social and cultural value, as poverty increases, and markets shrink, ultimately leading to brutal fights and fierce competition in the virtual domain.

Another characteristic of the polypore state involves familism, or *the replacement of gender politics with family politics*, based on a normative model limited exclusively to heterosexual married couples, who are supported by state social policies. The vocabulary, agenda, action plans and international networks born of Hungarian women's movements are all embedded in the discourse of women's universal rights. The rhetoric of familism took off from a women's rights framework but replaced women with the family as its key focus. Women are present as caregivers: wives, mothers and, at best, as part-time workers. For feminists used to working within a human rights framework, this was an unexpected turn for which they were ill-prepared. It took them by surprise when government measures, such as access to childcare assistance for the employed in 2014, which had significantly increased the number of working mothers with small children, became widely popular. The family tax and the flat-rate tax in 2011 are also popular, even though volumes of expert analysis prove that the first is disadvantageous for women, while the latter only favours high income families (Szikra 2014). The fact that voters are opting for measures that work against their own economic interests and supporting a party which impoverishes them further is a new phenomenon. This, in and of itself, calls for a more complex analysis of voter motivations. A further challenge for feminist politics is to communicate such policy consequences in an interesting, comprehensive manner at a time when the ideological and physical spaces are dominated by the polypore state. So far, we have no solutions for these challenges. Government propaganda has deliberately undermined the social and symbolic legitimation of Gender Studies and the activist work carried out by NGOs; this has only exacerbated the panic and bitterness felt among those involved, sparking additional, venomous Facebook debates.

This leads us to consider the third characteristic of the polypore state, namely, its *utilization of security discourse*. The FIDESZ government regularly presents policy-related questions as national security issues. According to this rhetoric, the vigilant government is working to defeat the threats posed by Brussels, the migrants, György Soros etc. According to government propaganda, NGOs, especially women's rights

organizations are likewise threatening, subverting the traditional family model, using foreign money and following foreign orders. The feminist activists who attempt to counter this discourse start from a very disadvantaged position. On the one hand, government arguments are irrational, as illustrated by the fact that the number of persons officially seeking asylum in Hungary was and remains negligible. Yet, the government succeeded in introducing an emotional turn which has made the application of rational arguments impossible. On the other hand, use of security discourse has sabotaged the legitimacy of the earlier, all-encompassing human rights discourse. This marked a first perceptible shift in policy away from scientific knowledge, once the government started to use Gender Studies as an instrument for fear-mongering. State official applied the toolkit of science, by citing a hodgepodge of surveys in an ad hoc manner, which allowed them to undermine the relevance of gender research, their empirical findings, as well as the value and legitimacy of their scientific endeavours in general. Another example involves the attack on academic freedom by way of the Lex CEU (Central European University); in spring 2017 the Hungarian Parliament amended the Higher Educational Law targeting the CEU on two levels. First, it requires that the CEU must have a corresponding US campus, something it has never had in its twenty-six-year history; it further required that this campus be up and operating by January 1, 2018. Second, the bill demanded that hosting government sign a written agreement with the home-country government of any foreign university in Hungary. The US campus is operational as of this point, but the FIDESZ government failed to sign the agreement with the State of New York, where CEU is chartered. This was followed by the attack against the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, after FIDESZ's 2018 landslide victory allowed it to take direct state control of its budget (Pető 2017b).

The Anti-Gender Movement and the Establisment of a New World Order

Is there a perceptible difference in worldview between Gender Studies and the anti-gender movement, parallel to that between conservative and liberal political philosophies? Or does their relationship sooner resemble the one between creationism and evolutionary biology, in which the latter considers the former mock science, which the expert community needs to combat with all of its scientific might? Because Gender Studies is a revisionist science, emphasizing the importance of assessing who speaks from what position (as opposed to absolute scientific objectivity) and following a value-based revisionism (Tucker 2008). Gender Studies therefore cannot counter the pressure of the anti-gender equality movement by claiming that the latter is "unscientific" or "nonobjective". In other words, there is a re-visioning science built on the results of revisions, on one side, and, on the other, a science which itself is "re-visioning", and therefore highly vulnerable, since its own legitimacy is at stake. It has been a long road from Max Weber's famous *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (Weber 1917/2017) to the institutionalization of Gender Studies. Scientific findings are continuously revisited and updated, revised, of course, but its re-evaluation is not

acceptable. The anti-gender movement utilises pseudo-scientific arguments to support its ideological aims, but what makes it into a mock science is *the way* in which it does so. The language is saturated with hatred, the kind of hatred that the members of the Gender Studies Facebook group internalized and then turned against each other.

Conclusion

The anti-gender movement is not merely another offshoot of age-old anti-feminist backlash. When modern politicians like Orban, Erdogan and others claim that women's sole purpose is child-bearing, or when a pop celebrity who should remain nameless in this article discusses the so-called "female principle", meaning essentialised "womanhood" these are not simply conservative responses to the success of the second-wave feminist movements. The anti-gender movement is a fundamentally new phenomenon that was launched for the sake of establishing a new world order and not a backlash as it will create a fundamentally new context (Grzebalska 2016; Hark/Villa 2015; Pető 2015a, 2015b). It is a hegemonic fight for socialization in the Gramscian sense (Pető 2017c). The anti-gender movement stands as a nationalist, neoconservative response to the crisis induced by the global, neoliberal world order. It should therefore mobilize all people committed to human rights and democracy, and not only gender researchers (Grzebalska 2016; Kováts/Pető 2017). The anti-gender movement attacks liberalism and thus democracy, insofar as liberalism and democracy have been intertwined since the Enlightenment. In the meantime, the role of the state is changing, because the polypore state no longer considers diversity an asset anymore and moves from the alibi like compliance with EU diversity adopted for EU accession (Pető 2017d).

The opposition has yet to find any remedy against the functional characteristics of the polypore state, relying on the creation of a parallel NGO sphere, familism and the securitization of many issues not only migration but from food safety to education. This is partly because activists did not notice that all these processes are gendered, and that gender is the "symbolic glue" that connects and mobilizes political powers which had previously not seemed reconcilable; it also owes partly to their failure to match their political vocabulary to actual social problems (Grzebalska/Kováts/Pető 2017). Alhough the Sargentini-draft report for the European Parliament about the rule of law in Hungary talks about a dismantling of the rule of law and government interference in media, the voters are more concerned with everyday financial problems and the crisis of care (European Parliament/Sargentini 2018).

Feminist politics should reconsider the reasons and the consequences of not having been part of mainstream progressive politics since the collapse of communism; feminists must learn to respond to real social problems in an accessible language. It is only then that we can hope that future Facebook debates will not shatter Hungarian community of gender researchers and activists, and that a social media network like the FHSA would grow to encompass more than its current seven hundred members. The feminist activist who submitted this request to join the new Facebook group,

which might be the first step in a much-needed process of self-reflection. Lastly and most importantly, perhaps then our debates would not use the register and vocabulary of the FIDESZ-created hate rhetoric any more. This would be the first step toward avoiding the publication of an article explaining Orban's fourth national-populist victory in this journal in 2022.

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„Gender Studies" in Ungarn in Gefahr

Die ungarische Regierung plant mit dem Dekret 42294/2018 Gender-Studies an der privaten Zentraleuropäischen Universität (CEU) und der größten staatlichen Eötvös Lorand Universität (ELTE) abzuschaffen. Das Verbot ist Teil jener politischen Maßnahmen, die in dem Beitrag von Andrea Pető angesprochen werden und mit denen massiv in die akademische Freiheit eingegriffen wird. Zahlreiche Verbände auf europäischer Ebene ebenso wie auch in den verschiedenen Ländern haben gegen dieses Vorhaben protestiert. Auf unserer Facebook-Seite https://www.facebook.com/FeminaPolitica werden die aktuellen Entwicklungen dokumentiert. Dort finden sich auch Links zu verschiedenen Protestbriefen und Petitionen.

Gewalt an Frauen auf der Flucht

JASMIN KASSAI. HANNA LICHTENBERGER

Laut aktuellen Schätzungen des Hohen Kommissars der Vereinten Nationen für Menschenrechte (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights/UNHCR) waren bis Ende 2017 68,5 Millionen Menschen auf der Flucht, gut die Hälfte davon sind Frauen (UNHCR 2018, 56). Frauen fliehen wie Männer auch auf Grund von Menschenrechtsverletzungen, Krieg, Armut, Folter, staatlicher Repression. Hinzu kommen aber auch geschlechtsspezifische Fluchtgründe, wie unter anderem weib-

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