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Populist Use of Memory and Constitutionalism: Two Comments - II

By Andrea Pető*

In November of 2003, I received an e-mail from Diana, a 26 year old Hungarian Ph.D.-student of archaeology and Egyptology. She is also interested in gender studies, she wrote me, especially in the cult of female goddesses. She also sent me the article on this topic that she had recently published in the very mainstream Hungarian journal of religious studies, the *Review of History of the Church*. In this article, she refers to articles published in English, French, German and Italian, quoting sources in Latin and in Ancient Greek. In the e-mail, Diana asked for my help to give suggestions about literature on re-interpreting the role of women in religion because she was familiar with my work on populism, religion and gender.¹ Before the reader starts believing that I am using this very precious occasion to celebrate the developing communication between two generations of female scholars in Hungary, I would like to continue the story with a police report issued on the 23 June in 2004. In this police report, it was announced that, posters announcing a meeting of the so-called *Group of Hungarian Future* had been placed on the main boulevard of Budapest Arrow Cross. As is well known, the Arrow Cross was the Hungarian Nazi Party before and during World War II. The Group which is so concerned about the so-called Hungarian Future has 27 members and the founder of this group is Diana.

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¹ ANDREA PETŐ, NAPASSZONYOK ÉS HOLDKISASSZONYOK. A MAI MAGYAR KONZERVATÍV NŐI POLITIZÁLÁS ALAKTANA (Women of Sun and Girls of Moon. Morphology of Contemporary Hungarian Women Doing Politics) (2003).

In the interview published in a Hungarian daily newspaper, Diana said that from her birth she has been a dedicated national socialist, and that an inside voice told her that this ideology could not be negative. Her dedication to National Socialism was confirmed through her reading of St. Thomas of Aquinas and Rousseau, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Mussolini's *The Doctrine of Fascism*, which led her directly to the works by Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party. The members of this group - Diana said - are distancing themselves from the skinheads, whom she labels as ideologically uneducated. She also forecasted that, because Marxism and liberalism had the same roots, they thought that these ideologies were outdated and ready to disappear from the stage of history. Before posting the posters, Diana asked a policeman who was standing nearby if she could put the posters up. After the policeman reply that he did not know, she started to put up the posters announcing their meeting which bore a photograph of Ferenc Szalasi, who, as a head of the Hungarian quisling government, had been hanged as a war criminal in 1945.² The legal procedure which has been initiated against this group will produce very interesting documents for further analysis.

In this brief comment, I am trying to draw conclusions from this story for the collection of conference papers aimed at examining common aspects of constitutionalism, memory and populist movements. First, I would like to challenge the consequences of using constitutionalism as a regulative force; second, I will analyse the limits of the legal processes against populist political traditions, and I will finish with my reflections about the role of the policeman.

A. Belief in Constitutionalism as a Technical Frame for Handling Populism

In a recent article³ Vivian Grosswald Curran quoted Ernst Cassirer who had argued that the only kind of constitutional law that can work is that which represents a "constitution written in the citizens' mind". So, we have to ask the question of what kind of constitution Diana had on her mind after spending a minimum of 17 years in the Hungarian state educational system? She is not a *loser* of the transition since she was studying in the most élitist degree course at the main university in Budapest, and she does not sound like a simple minded person, either. So, none of the commonly used interpretative frames for the mobilisation of women in populist movement explains her case. The founding principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the belief that, if people are considered to be innocent, education

² NÉPSZABADSÁG, 23 June 2004, at <http://www.nepszabadsag.hu/Default.asp?DocCollID=180449&DocID=153057#153057>.

³ Vivian G. Curran, *Racism's Past and Law's Future*, 1 VERMONT LAW REVIEW (2004) 1.

plays a crucial role in socialisation.⁴ In our post-modern world, in which we believe that legal practices are the results of construction, how can the case of Diana and the issue of her “inside voice” and her “revelation” be handled? Who will win the argument between a substantive and rationalist argumentation? We know from the recent results of the European Parliamentary elections that parties with anti EU programmes won in the new Member States. Is there the imminent danger that anti-EU parties might benefit from the democratic deficit of the EU for their own purpose? On the other hand, “inside voices” are not necessarily against modernisation and progress. Just think about the case of St Francis, or the other saints who also came up with arguments outside the existing political and religious framework.

The “construction of the citizen’s mind” is also important from another aspect. Where do all these youngsters of Diana’s group come from? How come that they are familiar, too familiar, with this vocabulary and frame of Arrow Cross thinking after the 50 years of *hiatus* that was constructed during the period of communism, in which there was clear legal and political (and legal) instruction on how to handle the national socialist past? I would like to use two arguments here: one is related to memory, and the other to the language of divided collective memory.

The period of post-World War II reconstruction in Central Europe began with the struggle to control the memories of the war. The origins and forms of “mis-memoires”⁵ rebound from images of the past. In the period after 1945, we can see parallel two traditions of memory of the past developing in interactions that construct each other with the weapon of forced memory and party controlled amnesia, as well as the rivalries of representations authorised by different social actors.⁶ If we are not speaking about the immediate past but the *immediated* past then we get closer to solve the puzzle. And the site of this mediation was the family, where constitutional law had no access or regulative power. The construction of identity happened in the family, which drew a line between “us” and “them”, which is how the divisions between pro-Soviet and the anti-Soviet Hungarians were drawn. Those who identify themselves as “non-communist”, and this is the cornerstone of any identification, are referring to the crimes, the illegal acts committed in the name of the Soviet law in Hungary. This oppressed social group which consists of those who define themselves as the victims of communism

⁴ Quoted in Grosswald Curran (note 3), 4.

⁵ Tony Judt, *The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe*, 4 DAEDALUS 83 (1992).

⁶ See, for more, Andrea Pető, *Memory and the Narrative of Rape in Budapest and Vienna*, in: LIFE AFTER DEATH. APPROACHES TO A CULTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF EUROPE 129 (DIRK SCHUMANN/RICHARD BESSEL, EDs., 2003).

are creating a victimised language, a counter-discourse that made their stories “improvisable” in a communist dominated political discourse. After 1945, the language of “communist crimes” became a minority discourse which was developed against the oppressed majority and offered points of identification.⁷

For this group, World War II started with the Soviet occupation of Hungary in 1944, which, for them, was also the beginning of the post-war period. Their families were forced to move, their property was confiscated, and unwanted tenants with good contacts in the communist party were housed in their family houses. For the other half, the deportation of the Jews was normal. Just think about the speech that Bishop Ravasz, the father in law of Istvan Bibó, made in the Hungarian Upper House of the Parliament when he not only supported the First Anti-Jewish law, but made suggestions on how to improve the efficiency of that selfsame law.

The post-1945 Soviet controlled Eastern European states instrumentalized the fragmentation of the memory of World War II for a mediated past. This Manichean struggle for power (“anti-fascist communists against fascist reactionaries”) denied millions of people the right to mourn, and ranked personal losses according to political needs.⁸ As Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan have pointed out, “collective memory is not what everybody thinks”,⁹ it can belong to smaller communities, can be produced, cultivated, and constructed at the level of families or smaller communities. These families in Eastern Europe formed a type of “nationalist sub-culture” during communist times, when the “religious practice and tradition whereby dominant regime attitudes were fused with religious symbols and beliefs were passed from one generation to another”.¹⁰ So, here is the explanation of why Diana was so interested in female Goddesses. Living in an authoritarian regime which destroyed all previous networks of socialisation and identity formation, the family as a kinship and normative unit served as a site of identity formation. Establishing facts, creating and recycling consensually accepted parts of historical memory happened in the family. If we wish to understand Diana’s motivation, we have to carry out research in this direction in the future.

⁷ Gill Seidel, *Right-Wing Discourse and Power: Exclusion and Resistance*, in: THE NATURE OF THE RIGHT. A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF ORDER PATTERNS 7 (GILL SEIDEL, ED., 1988).

⁸ See Andrea Pető, *Memory Unchanged. Redefinition of Identities in Post WW II Hungary*, CEU HISTORY DEPARTMENT YEARBOOK 1997-98 135 (1999).

⁹ WAR AND REMEMBRANCE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY 9 (JAY WINTER/EMMANUEL SIVAN, ED., 2000).

¹⁰ Hank Johnston, *New Social Movements and Old Regional Nationalisms*, in: NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS. FROM IDEOLOGY TO IDENTITY 267, 271 (ENRIQUE LARANA ET AL., ED., 1994).

B. Belief in Corrective Justice

I am using the story of Diana here because of another aspect of her story. I am working on the gender aspects of the present right wing political discourse and populism with the pre-1945 Arrow Cross party discourse.¹¹ We all had the illusion that after 1989, after the collapse of the communist system, that populism and political extremism would become marginalised. The other illusion that we had was related to women's participation which we hoped would increase in the new democratic political arena.¹² But it turned out that the masculinization¹³ of Eastern Europe brought about the lowest possible participation of women in public life, a ghettoised feminist movement and the increasing influence of the "non-progressive" women's movement. The phenomenon of why women are active in political movements which actually serve to reinforce traditional gender roles and male hierarchy brought me to write the book that made Diana to contact me. So, in what theoretical framework can we interpret the birth of a new female political leader? I was interested in how the construction of gender relations follows the way in which the "other" is constructed. The specific vision of the ideal society mirroring the idealised gender relations is hierarchical, binary, and normative.

Victoria de Grazia used the term "post political citizenship" for her analysis of fascist Italy in which she stated that identity politics served as a strategy for resistance and agency.¹⁴ In the present EU, how gender sensitive post-political citizenship will be defined in a European framework remains a key question.¹⁵ In the case of Diana, she found a window of opportunity in national socialist ideology to construct women's subjectivity as a site of resistance. The subversive character of her gender politics serves as a strategy for resistance, constructs her agency, and

¹¹ Andrea Pető, *Frauenvereine in Ungarn (1945-1951). Vom Ende des Zweites Weltkriegs bis zur Zerstörung des Vereinswesens*, in: NACH DEM KRIEG. FRAUENLEBEN UND GESLECHTERKONSTRUKTIONEN IN EUROPE NACH DEM ZWEITEN WELTKRIEG, FORUM FRAUENGESCHICHTE 23 138 (IRENE BANDHAUER SCHÖFFMANN/CLAIRE DUCHENS, EDS., 2000).

¹² See more in Andrea Pető, *Hungarian Women in Politics*, in: TRANSITIONS, ENVIRONMENTS, TRANSLATIONS: THE MEANINGS OF FEMINISM IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS 153 (JOAN SCOTT/CORA KAPLAN/DEBRA KEATS, EDS., 1997).

¹³ Peggy Watson, *The Rise of Masculinism in Eastern Europe*, 3-4 NEW LEFT REVIEW 71 (1993).

¹⁴ Victoria de Grazia, *Nationalising Women: The Competition between Fascist and Commercial Cultural Models in Mussolini's Italy*, in: THE SEX OF THINGS. GENDER AND CONSUMPTION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE 356 (G. FURLOUGH/V. DE GRAZIA, EDS., 2000).

¹⁵ More on this see: Andrea Pető, *Angebot ohne Nachfrage. Ungarische Frauen als Bürgerinnen eines EU-Betrittslandes*, in: EUROPAS TÖCHTER. TRADITIONEN, ERWARTUNGEN UND STRATEGIEN VON FRAUENBEWEGUNGEN IN EUROPA 183 (SILKE ROTH/INGRID MIETHE, EDS., 2003).

makes her a political leader in a world where there are very few female political leaders on the other side of the political spectrum.¹⁶

I recognised the pressing need to understand the link between the pre-1945 and post-1989 Arrow Cross public discourse. This link, which is represented, or rather embodied, in Diana, deserves our attention because of the gender politics of post-1945 people's tribunal. These legal processes produced massive lustration processes, and it ended up with hanging ministers, and even prime ministers for war crimes. So, lustration from 1945 onwards served as ritual which required essentialized and homogenised understandings of the Past. My present book project is a monograph about women in the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party, so I am spending quiet days in the archive reading the post-1945 people's tribunal reports about women.

These individual cases very strongly support the thesis that corrective justice, basis of the individual responsibility and punishment does not work. Each and every case is problematical because of the mediated character of justice. Individualised arguments do not fit into the constructed character of the grand historical narrative. In the case of these trials, the analyses of a very basic gender aspect - how many women are there - is redundant. Legal profession was opened up to women in 1945, so all decision-makers were men, while the convicted, the witnesses and the victims were women. In one of these trials, the convicted woman had also heard "inside voices" which made her a staunch believer in Szálasi, so she participated every day of the public trial, and spent hours on the other side of wall of the prison where Szálasi was being kept in order to have at least a "meeting" with his aura. A very similar case to Diana! The gender politics of the court was, in brief, to punish those who had been active members of the Arrow Cross Party, and although they might not have committed murder themselves, their political consciousness needed to be broken. In the case of the women who had killed but who confessed that it had all been done under the order or the influence of their male partners, the verdict was considerably milder. So, the people's tribunal also served as a corrective force to restructure the gender hierarchy, the "matriarchy born in need" after the World War II

C. Role of the Policeman

To finish this brief comment, I would like to ask everyone to imagine themselves in the place of the policeman. He was trained in Hungary in an educational system which pays very little attention to the history of minorities. It made no difference

¹⁶ For the debate if women's participation in fascist movements could be analysed from a gender perspective see JULIE V. GOTTLIEB, *FEMININE FASCISM. WOMEN IN BRITAIN'S FASCISM MOVEMENT 1923-1945* (2000).

that, in 2001, an obligatory Holocaust Remembrance Day was introduced in the Hungarian schools, possibly because the commemorative practices are very much resembling to the 7 November commemorations which celebrate the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. He might have read about the recent trial, in which a protestant priest, the leader of the extreme right wing party, *Hungarian Life and Truth* (MIÉP) was not convicted when he referred to Galician newcomers as the source of all problems of present day Hungary. The theoretical but at the same time very politicized debate about the relationship between the freedom of speech and the symbols of totalitarian systems is going on between experts and members of the different élites. Are we in a position to ask the policeman not only to follow this debate but also to differentiate between memory and recollection? The term "memory" which refers to the understanding of the past with an aim for the future, and the "recollection" or "zachor" the term which goes back to the demand us to remember. Are our hopes for a policeman to act as a responsible Emersonian individual in post-Nazi, post-communist Hungary too idealistic? We all have to start with the question of what our answer would have been if Diana had asked us it was possible to put up that poster? Also, we should not be so idealistic as to believe that the EU should act as a policeman instead of us.