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Gender equality as re-enchantment: political mobilisation in the times of “neo-patriarchal neo-liberalism” and possibilities of bipartisan dialogue

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WOMAN UJ! 2

● A transatlantic gender dialogue ●

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



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Fondation

WOMAN UP!

2

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WOMAN UP! 2

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A transatlantic gender dialogue.

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GENDER EQUALITY AS RE-ENCHANTMENT:

POLITICAL MOBILISATION IN
THE TIMES OF “NEO-PATRIARCHAL
NEO-LIBERALISM” AND POSSIBILITIES
OF BIPARTISAN DIALOGUE

By Andrea Petó

Recent years have brought unprecedented civil activism in Europe. From France to Istanbul, tens of thousands of protesters were rallying to support progressive politics independently from political parties. In post-democracy (Collin Crouch) new political programs emerging rearticulating the relationship between state and citizens are redefining and constructing new

spaces outside the neoliberal representational democracy often criticising gender hierarchies but always outside political parties.

Max Weber dedicated very few lines to one of his key concepts: *Entzauberung der Welt* in his lecture later, in 1919, published as *Wissenschaft als Beruf*. Here he wrote about intellectualism and rationalism as key characteristics of modernity when religious authorities and mystical explanations are no longer ruling the world. The disappearance of enchantment or disenchantment has consequences for languages and technologies of politics.

Belonging to a political community was deterministic and led by magical forces. The age of enlightenment brought in objectivity, choice and rational political actors. The disenchantment was a constitutive part of capitalism as a productive system built on rationality. As far as the criticism of this rational system is concerned, Ernest Gellner wrote about the re-enchantment as a process initiated by psychoanalysis, Marxism and phenomenology to list some of them. (Gellner 1975: 431-45)

In this paper I will bring examples from Central Europe to illustrate how spaces for articulating different political agenda have been changed as a result of the systemic crises of representative democracy in relation to re-enchantment. Also following Hazel Healy's analysis of "feminist spring" who defines feminism quoting Jessica Valenti as "the current surge as 'self-directed and loosely organized; fast-moving micro-movements without institutional leadership'" I am looking at the political potential of "feminist spring" in Central Europe, analysing two examples: the women's congresses and dialogue in gender equality, asking the question what role the fight against disenchantment of the world plays in these movements (Healy 2014).

Protesters of civic activism from Maidan to Budapest were not enchanted by the existing political alternatives and they were searching for a new political language, rhetoric, and a different form of belonging. Can a progressive, emancipatory women's movement be an actor in this process of re-enchantment? Can we connect "feminist spring" with re-enchantment?

● First example: Women's congresses in central Europe

In the past six years based on the Polish example, other countries such as Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary have started to organise women's congresses that are cutting through party political lines focusing on coalitional mobilisation for gender equality. The anniversary celebrations of the Solidarity movement in Poland played a crucial role in resisting and dismantling communism omitted women as actors.

Women who were active in the Solidarity movement have been transmitting their network to the business world, so a very strong stratum of women in business has developed over the last decades. They were those who reached out to other networks of activists, scholars and politicians. The annual event of a congress of all women in Poland (<http://www.kongreskobiet.pl/en-EN/>) has been organised in a framework that Poland will do better in if women participate. The traditional effectivity argument serves the Polish hegemonic national politics. As a result of these efforts, a shadow women's cabinet was established which includes experts and politicians. This coalitional mobilisation achieved the introduction of a 30% quota in the Parliament. The system of "women's congresses" became a "know-how" and other members of the Visegrad countries also started to organise their own "women's congresses". (For more on this see Pető, Vasali 2014 and Pető, Vasali, forthcoming).

The very weak women's NGOs in Hungary constitute three separate umbrella organisations: socialist, liberal, and conservative-religious. In June 2013, these three umbrella organisations signed a declaration demanding parity on national party and European Parliamentary election lists: (<http://noierdek.hu/?p=27262> accessed December 22, 2013). The term "parity" was chosen in lieu of "quota," a term that carries heavy ideological baggage. (Moreover, the last bipartisan action seeking the adoption of a quota law in Hungary had failed at the time of the leftist-liberal government, despite the support of several conservative women MPs).

This declaration, signed by the three umbrella organisations, seemed to have created a new space for articulating the demand for more women in politics.

The story did not end well. When the declaration appeared in the press, the conservative umbrella organisation ousted its successful and popular leader and withdrew its support for the Hungarian Women's Congress, which was held on November 11, 2013 and was based on the very successful Polish example. It also declined to participate in the conferences on women's participation in politics organised by the OSCE and CEU. The declaration was only the second attempt since the Roundtable Discussions in 1988-1989 to redefine public interest across party lines. But it failed due to party cleavages. *Heti Válasz*, a major conservative weekly, published a "fact-finding" article about how foreign entities, including the Open Society Institute and the Norwegian Embassy, were financing anti-government propaganda by way of women NGOs in Hungary (Heti Válasz, August 15, 2013, 12-15).

Hungary has a low ranking on the Gender Equality Index. The recent CEDAW report warned that nearly all fields of inquiry have remained largely ignored by the government: (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/cedaws54.htm>).

In the EU, Hungary is at the bottom of the list in terms of women's participation in politics. The analysis of the electoral system proved that the new electoral law for the 2014 elections failed to improve the number of women in politics – with the introduction of single majoritarian districts. The attempt to organise women's congress based on wide mobilisation failed as party affiliation/loyalty turned to be more important. The secular, human rights based NGO activists failed to build a coalition with conservative NGOs, and the other way round conservative NGOs, who are sponsored heavily for their work by the present government, have not found any reason to build bipartisan coalition.

The political parties were addressing women as mothers independently from their party affiliations during the election of 2014. As a result 9% of the seats in the present Parliament in Hungary are given to women for the four years to come.

Shall we conclude from this brief comparison of Poland and Hungary that the "women's congresses" are not the part of the "feminist spring" as they are very well organised, policy oriented and rooted in the emancipator tradition of the enlightenment? I would argue against it as the women's congresses are playing a crucial role to create a coalitional umbrella infrastructure of different women's NGOs, policy makers, academics to lobby for policy change in a crucial area: introducing new sensitivity in the political space for bipartisan dialogue and

political representation in the existing neoliberal framework. It is contributing to the process of enchantment of the world, creating clear standards and introducing the technical language of equality.

● Second example: dialogue on gender equality

Can a room full of men and women representing different political positions following talks and making comments considered to be a form of gender activism as a part of the "feminist spring"? Can this debate and discussion be a site of rethinking the consequences of enchantment? Definitely it is the case of Hungary when the society and cultural life is so much polarised. The debate series organised by the Ebert Foundation from autumn 2013 in Budapest managed to attract participants from different political forces. Three debates were organised with more than 300 participants and more than 1500 views of the films summarizing the debates: On gender ideology: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O82sWwjeT8I&feature=youtu.be> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQLw2OapiKo&feature=youtu.be> and an motherhood: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8w8FlwPcVQg&feature=youtu.be>

In Central Europe, the countries with a statist feminist heritage pre the WWII patriarchal system lived comfortably together with the post-WWII communist system as far as everyday habitual practices are concerned. Woman as a mother defined by the state has never left the political rhetoric even at the high points of communist social engineering project.

After the collapse of communism the social welfare provisions related to motherhood survived as the newly emerging democracies were driven by nation building projects in a neoliberal framework. As Beatrix Campbell has described "neo-patriarchal neo-liberalism" ("an ugly name for an ugly deal") on the one hand increased gender inequalities with its policies and on the other hand offered a work/employment dichotomy as a foundational relationship for neoliberal reconstruction. As employment is labelled as the primary site for emancipation, this necessarily moved motherhood in the direction of problem identity where state intervention is needed. The welfare provisions however are in danger due to the impoverishment of the state need

redefinition of citizenship. Therefore women are pushed into a looser position: the definition of work as a full time, long term employment with social security benefit is becoming an exception rather than the norm. Therefore the whole site of emancipation needs to be reconsidered and it not surprisingly the number of women who consider family as the most lucrative and safe site for employment increased.

This redefinition in neoliberal democracy can take several directions and it offers a space for a discussion on crucial issues as far as gender equality is concerned. The tendencies to redefine human rights and to hijack the existing gender equality machinery for supporting “family” are very much present on the level of the state apparatus. The question is if these discussions will build up trust to question these attempts while critically reflecting on the available language and rhetoric. The process of listening and explaining as a tool of learning and fostering community is as simple as it may sound but makes the individuals a member of a community of listeners, which is the first step towards re-enchantment.

● Instead of conclusions: two dangers ahead

What kind of conclusions can we draw from these two examples as far as an alternative to disenchantment is concerned?

Far right fundamentalist gender politics, which is also based on politics of care and places family in the centre, absorbs the political space for conservative women’s politics and unites all political forces oppressed by the dominant communist political system. The rhetoric of progress, the concept of “New Woman” will be appropriated by anti-modernist political forces. (Petó 2010: 189-201, 2012: 130-138) The far right political forces are very effectively using the fight against disenchantment in their political mobilisation. Unless progressive politics comes up with an alternative, the process of re-enchantment will be taken over by far right political forces constructing emotional communities.

Second, the rhetoric of the victorious neoconservative politics after 1989 leaving the emancipatory leftist politics in a defensive position as their rhetoric is defensive (protecting women) and negative rhetoric (fighting against discrimination). As it is not critiquing the neoliberal politics, it remains the

prisoner of progress. Lisa Brush has called maternalism “feminism for hard times” (Brush: 1996: 431). Maybe the rethinking of maternalism is the way out from the deadlock when the electoral support of traditional progressive parties is not increasing while social, economic problems are increasing. To return to the opening statement regarding mobilisation, political parties should either reconsider their position towards disenchantment or they will be on the losing side in the fight for electoral support with protest movements. We cannot really afford disenchantment - again.

WOMAN UP! 2

“Woman Up! 2” highlights various aspects that need to be taken into consideration when developing a progressive transatlantic gender agenda. Gender equality should be understood as more than just women’s rights in regard with private sphere. The various spheres touched upon in the publication vary from security to religion, from ICT to civil activism, and more. The publication looks upon issues hindering progressive achievements and ways out of the deadlock. The authors draw attention to already existing changes, as well as on the need to change further.

The contributions have gathered insight from the fifth transatlantic gender conference. However, this publication aims to take a further step from the points raised during that event, with a perspective to strengthen strategies, offer inspiration for future discussions, and spread the word about the outcomes of this important ongoing dialogue.

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