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Report from the trenches: The debate around teaching gender studies in Hungary

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Academics in the field of gender studies do not normally experience a high level of public interest in their work, yet in recent months things have taken a turn in Hungary.



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Not only has the number of prospective students increased, but blogs and the mainstream media have focused unprecedented attention on these academics, inquiring about what exactly it is that they teach, how and why they teach it, and how their graduates' will do on the job market. This wave of interest in the field of gender studies can be explained by the interaction of two factors.

The first was the relatively late institutionalisation of gender studies in Hungary, which unfortunately has coincided with the emergence of transnational movements using the concept of "gender" for mobilisation against gender equality. The second was the Hungarian government's decision to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) three years after its signing, which prompted protest of fundamentalists of various religions. Here, I will examine the interaction of these factors, which has resulted in the increase of news coverage, blog posts and television reports on gender studies in the Hungarian higher education. At the same time, politicians, bloggers, actors, celebrities, self-acclaimed experts, even cooks, and occasionally even academics in the field are making statements about content, form and impacts of teaching gender studies.

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conflict. Recent events suggest that this third scenario is becoming increasingly likely.

The development of gender studies in Hungary

In Hungary the collapse of communism in the 1990s made it possible for interested students to study gender studies at their university course, even though it was not possible to get a degree in the field at the time. During this period, gender studies in Hungary were powered by three intellectual streams. The first was research on social inequality, women's employment, social stratification, social policy, poverty and inequality, which had a long tradition in Hungarian sociology. Following earlier efforts at the University of Economics (formerly Karl Marx University) a Women's Studies Center was founded. The Faculty of Social Sciences at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) filed for the accreditation of its master's course in gender studies, and after a two-year-long tedious administrative process it was authorised to start from autumn 2017.

The second intellectual stream of gender studies in Hungary is the gendering of long-established humanities disciplines such as history, literature and linguistics. Feminist literature and linguistics played a crucial role in this, as did certain Anglo-American studies departments that were able to integrate gender into their modules. As a result, gender studies centres were established at universities in Szeged, Debrecen and Miskolc. In 2016, the Research Centre of Women's History at ELTE emerged through an interdepartmental collaboration at the Faculty of Arts, and a new doctoral degree is expected to be launched in the autumn semester of 2017 at the Department of American Studies.

The third stream comes from work done by women's NGOs, which in many countries were able to establish women's centres publishing journals or offering courses on domestic violence, civic engagement, and training women entrepreneurs among other topics. In Hungary, however, such organisations have so far failed to establish an educational institution of their own. This is mostly due to a lack of funding, indifference on the side of possible donors, and, most significantly from 2010 onwards, the Hungarian government's open war on civil organisations. Nevertheless, several publications addressing violence against women and social policies concerning women in Hungary were initiated by NGOs.

The reason for the late accreditation of gender studies in Hungary is twofold: on the one hand, the way how Central European University (CEU) has submitted accreditation for its degree. This resulted in all further applications for master's

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collaboration impossible. On the other hand, the number of academics in Hungary qualified to teach in the field of gender studies degree courses has been insufficient. Only recently has a critical mass of academics with specialisations in this field emerged in Hungary, mostly from CEU graduates who have been already employed by ELTE as no additional funding was available to launch this new educational programme.

The stakes of the discourse

How did a subculture within university education become a hot political topic in the media? Why has Bence Rétvári, the undersecretary of the Ministry of Human Resources, compared gender studies to Marxism-Leninism? Why has the Alliance of Young Christian Democrats (IKSZ) sent an open letter to ELTE's rector stating that gender studies represent "fake science", are the product of the "gay lobby", and do not contribute to solving the real problem of demographic decline?

At first glance, such vehement reactions are difficult to understand. After all, accreditation of teaching programs in higher education are in the sole competence of the Hungarian Accreditations Committee, which has not experienced any direct political influence in its work since 1990. Looking at the wider context, however, the increased media attention focused on gender studies can be explained by both the process of building an illiberal democracy in Hungary and the global fight against gender equality have reached Hungary. For illiberal populists, the concept of "gender ideology" has become a powerful symbolic glue for the current insecurity of the socioeconomic order and its structural injustices. This has made it possible for illiberal public actors to exploit popular discontent by directing public attention towards questions of gender equality. Attacks on secular values and the norms of human rights and equal opportunity fit well into the Hungarian government's anti-EU rhetoric, their criticism of the current system of liberal democracy, and their strategy to mobilise for their own state funded civil organisations. Hungary's government can gain wider support for all of these measures by constructing a frightening image around the concept of "gender", which is why gender studies as such is suddenly at the centre of heated public debate.

Possible scenarios for the future

The least probable scenario for the near future would be for gender studies to return to its former status as an issue attracting little attention and widespread

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with questions about the content and methods of gender studies resurfacing in the media from time to time. This seemed likely in early March, when it was announced that the government would launch a “counter course” at Corvinus University to the gender studies masters` degree course at ELTE, with a planned starting date of autumn 2017. And while the government, despite significant opposition from both national and transnational fundamentalist groups, remain politically committed to implementing the Istanbul Convention (and drawing significant EU funds for this purpose), a media campaign against gender studies directed by government members of secondary importance serves to divert critics` attention from this effort.

With respect to the third scenario, it was thought to be too risky for the Hungarian government to launch an open assault against gender studies and the institutions teaching them because this would affect the master`s course at Central European University, which is already well established and well-connected internationally. Moreover, this would also imply the politicisation of academics in the field, who would most definitely take such a violation of their autonomy as a declaration of war. Withdrawing state support from a mostly student financed degree program would not be particularly effective, but the government has a number of administrative measures silently sabotaging the functioning of a master`s program. Finally, as the elections are close, such a controversy involving university students could help to unify the otherwise divided political opposition.

Despite this, the government appear to have chosen the path of open conflict by widening the focus of their attack from gender studies education in particular to international higher education in Hungary generally. On 4th April, a bill was passed by the Hungarian Parliament that aims to encumber CEU`s operations by regulating, among other things, the employment and admissions policies as well as the curriculum of international universities as a condition of a bilateral intergovernmental political agreement.

These proposed changes are really about hierarchy and political control, and CEU was founded in 1991 to combat exactly these values and government practices. It is not surprising then, that a whole network of CEU alumni, political and academic supporters was very quickly mobilised, and on 2 April more than 10,000 people protested in Budapest, followed by another protest on 9 April of about 70,000 participants, with solidarity protests in London, Vienna, Berlin and Cluj. Hungarian universities, student unions, as well as a wide range of international academics are standing by CEU and the autonomy of education. The bill needs to be countersigned by President Ader by 10th April.

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