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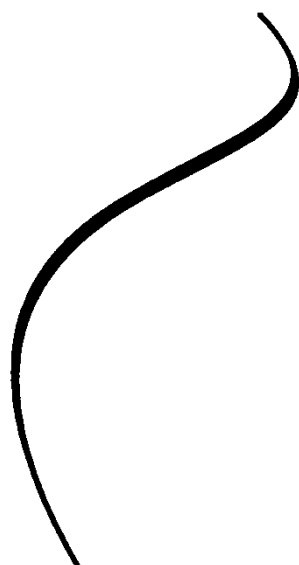
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Women and "the alternative public sphere": toward a new definition of women's activism and the separate spheres in East-Central Europe¹

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ABSTRACT. In the years following the end of the cold war in 1989, Western feminist scholars and activists expressed disappointment in the failure of the newly democratic Eastern and Central European countries to sustain mainstream women's rights movements and achieve a marked increase in women's participation within the new political parties and political life in general. The authors, historians of Hungarian women's movements with a broad East-West perspective, offer a novel explanation for this phenomenon. Following an outline of the main stages of Hungarian women's movements and women's political participation, they focus on two instances in twentieth-century Hungarian history that resulted in a rapid transition from anti-democratic regimes to liberal, parliamentary systems: the 1918 bourgeois democratic revolution and the 1990 re-introduction of free parliamentary elections. Examining these two turning points in recent Hungarian history, separated by 70 years, as case studies of women's activism, the authors propose a new, critical

re-evaluation of the notion of separate spheres, offering a timely if co-incidental comment on the recent debate in the *Journal of Women's History*.²

Two instances in twentieth-century Hungarian history resulted in a rapid transition from anti-democratic regimes to liberal, parliamentary systems. Defying expectations from women activists and outside observers, both the 1918 bourgeois democratic revolution and the 1989 re-introduction of free parliamentary elections failed to provide women with any significant increase in political representation. In the following, we will examine these two case studies of women's activism in Hungary, separated by 70 years, as well as provide a chronology of the history of women's participation in Hungarian politics for the period in between. Introducing a critical re-evaluation of the paradigm of separate spheres, we will argue that under the particular conditions preceding both regime changes, gender relations within the democratic opposition took on a form incompatible with the dichotomy of separate spheres. The model we are proposing in its place combines the findings of Barbara Einhorn (Einhorn 1993) with a new reading of Habermas's "authentic public sphere" (Habermas 1989). This "alternative public sphere" was created in opposition to the "public sphere" of official, mainstream politics and as the expansion of a private sphere that took on positive connotations as a site of resistance and integrity with the result that at critical junctures, women activists sided with their male counterparts, forfeiting or delegating the representation of separate gender interests to them.

From the turn of the century to 1918: formation of "alternative public sphere"

Recent studies on the history of European bourgeois women's movements have uncovered

a tightly knit, international web of institutional and personal networks, along with striking similarities in the local movements' goals, concerns and dynamics (Rupp 1997, Paletschek and Pietrow-Ennker 2004). The Hungarian bourgeois women's movement of the early 20th century provides a strong point in case: during its short history, it displayed an agenda closely modeled on the program of its Western counterparts (Szapor 2004).

During the last decade before the First World War, Hungarian bourgeois feminists had solidified their ties with the international women's rights movement and focused their fight for political, educational and legal rights increasingly on the suffrage. In keeping with the similarities with Western European women's rights movements, Hungarian bourgeois feminists reaped the reward of their 15-year long struggle at the end of the First World War. The new government of the National Council, born as a result of the revolution of 31st October 1918, and led by Count Michael Károlyi and a coalition of liberal nationalists, social democrats, bourgeois radicals and various groups of intellectuals, represented a comprehensive program of democratic reforms. In its first "popular decree" it extended universal manhood suffrage to men over the age of 21 and women over the age of 24. Károlyi himself had been a declared supporter of women's rights since before the war, and the Feminists joined the National Council that provided the mandate for his revolutionary government until parliamentary elections, scheduled for March 1919. This was, however, where the similarities with Western European women's movements ended. The scheduled elections never took place; instead, the Communist takeover in March 1919 was followed in short order by counter-revolution and the stabilization of a right-wing conservative regime that had gradually abolished democratic political reforms, including women's political and educational rights and their main representative organization, the Association of Hungarian Feminists.

It is against this bleak outcome that one has to consider the performance and fate of the Feminists during the months of the democratic revolution. In the absence of any detailed study on the history of the Feminist Association during the revolutionary months, we can only venture an indirect assessment that, judging from the end result, they failed to renew their strategy and re-energize their membership in the drastically changed political context. However, sources pointing to the concrete circumstances of this failure provide important clues for a re-evaluation of the separate spheres in an East-Central European context.

From October 1918 when they joined the governing National Council, the Feminists waged a losing battle to keep their Association above and beyond the quickly emerging political parties. They argued that their mission in the new political landscape was to maintain the role of the independent observer, as the guardian of women's rights (Szapor, forthcoming). By the end of 1918, the failure of this strategy was clearly confirmed as former feminist activists had joined political parties from the extreme left to the extreme nationalist right. More to the point, a strong cohort of former feminists who identified themselves as "Radical Women" defected to the Bourgeois Radicals, a party of democratic socialists and left liberals led by Oscar Jaszi. It is the latter group, self-identified as "Radical Women" that we are concerned with, as recently emerged evidence about their agenda points to deeper, long-term roots of the failure of the Feminists in the new political context emerging after the war.

The evidence consists of documents written by members of the women's activist group, running for parliamentary elections under the banner of the Bourgeois Radicals at the end of 1918. In them, they accuse the Feminists not only of failing to come up with a new strategy, adjusted to the changed political environment but also of failing to represent women's interests in the past. There were no specific, abstract women's interests, charged the document, to be represented by a women's party; middle-class

women were best represented by the parties of their male counterparts, just as working-class women's interests were best represented by the political party of the working class. It was of course not an unfamiliar accusation; with its roots in the accepted Marxist wisdom of the day, it was frequently evoked during the previous decade, the most intensive years of the fight for both universal manhood suffrage and women's suffrage, by the Social Democrats, competing with bourgeois feminists for the support of women workers (Szapor, forthcoming). Yet it had a very different sting coming from women's activists with close ties to the Feminists. The signatories of the document, all woman candidates for the Bourgeois Radical Party in the upcoming elections, had been, without exception, long-standing members of the Association of Feminists who had severed their ties to the Association only weeks before. And while their position at this point could be attributed, to some degree, to the heated climate of the election campaign, it also betrayed a deeper-running ambiguity concerning the perception of women's special rights. Ultimately, it highlighted the systemic difficulties of building and maintaining a political movement representing women's interests at crucial points in Hungarian history.

For an explanation, we have to go back to the construction of Hungary's democratic, extra-parliamentary opposition during the decade preceding World War I. Organized as a loose web of institutions and personal networks, it was a counter-culture that united existing (Social Democrats) and emerging (Bourgeois Radicals) political parties, as well as the formal and informal institutions of the urban intelligentsia and artistic and literary avant-garde. The Association of Hungarian Feminists was a respected and recognized member of this counter-culture, representing the special interests of women, with an emphasis on the rights of middle-class working women. While the first leaders of the Feminists came from the ranks of the first white-collar female union, the bulk of the membership was recruited from the slightly younger, increasingly

university educated cohort of young women (Szapor 2004). They had strong personal ties to this counter-culture, itself largely excluded from mainstream political and social life. These two factors combined had the effect of creating a realignment of the public and private spheres markedly different from that described in the Western context.

The progressive counter-culture of early twentieth-century Budapest emerged outside of the “public sphere” of official, mainstream politics and culture and as an extension of the “private.” This last point, the fluidity between the “private sphere” and the counter-culture is well illustrated by the significant role of salons in the early days of this counter-culture, kept both by men and women. Much like the salons of the late 18th century, cited by Habermas as the scenes of the emerging “authentic public sphere” during the period preceding the French Revolution, their latter-day incarnations in early twentieth-century Budapest played a crucial role in negotiating a fertile middle ground between the private and the public (Habermas 1989, 30; Szapor, forthcoming). These informal institutions, such as debating societies and open universities, formed the backbone of an “alternative public sphere” that provided its members with the framework of full-fledged political activism at a time when official, mainstream political life was closed to them (Szapor, forthcoming).

In addition to training its male members in the skills needed for public, political and cultural roles, this alternative public sphere also provided an environment in which young women could experiment with new, public roles. Not only did this alternative public sphere support their sustained efforts for higher education and social and political activism but, at the same time, allowed them to stay within the established norms of social respectability. This also explains the over-representation of young women from assimilated Jewish families among the university graduates and feminist activists: they encountered less resistance—and in many cases were supported by their families—than

young women from the traditional, Christian elite (Pető 2002).

While the above application of Habermas’s model to detect an “authentic public sphere” that we will call “alternative” challenges the paradigm of separate spheres widely used in Western women’s history, it also highlights the long-term consequences of such an alternative model to women’s perception of gender divisions and specific gender interests. It was Barbara Einhorn who first called attention to the changing meanings of the private and public spheres under different social and political conditions when she argued that under the vastly different experiences of Eastern European women (in her case those living in the oppressed civil society of the German Democratic Republic in the years preceding 1989), the dichotomy of private and public spheres gained widely different meanings from those in Western Europe (Einhorn 1993, 6). In this case, the official policy of gender equality discredited any public commitment to women’s rights because it was represented by an oppressive state; on the other hand, the private sphere, the only haven of civil society, reinforced solidarity between the genders.

Mutatis mutandis, the alternative public sphere of Hungary’s turn-of-the-century counter-culture shaped its young women members’ perception of gender divisions and gender interests. Their early, defining experiences were acquired in the decade preceding World War I when their cohort was part of the alliance of progressive political and artistic movements, in an all-out fight against the gatekeepers of semi-feudal, conservative official Hungary. In other words, in their perception the main frontlines were drawn not between men on the one side, protecting the boundaries of the public sphere and reinforcing the patriarchy of the private sphere, and women on the other side, but between representatives of the old and new Hungary. Despite the ambiguity and setbacks in the representation of women’s rights by the progressive political forces, including the Social Democrats and the Bourgeois Radicals,

it was on the strength of this solidarity—whether perceived or real is beside the point here—that the “Radical Women” of 1918 opted for delegating the representation of women’s rights to their male comrades-in-arms and demolishing the remnants of their former sisterhood at the end of 1918, in the hour of their short-lived triumph.

1919–1945: the “alternative public sphere” as a submerged network

The short-lived triumph failed to survive the first Soviet-type regime that governed Hungary between 21 March and 1 August 1919. At the elections for the Councils of workers and soldiers the government introduced a new, ideological type of discrimination: although in principle suffrage was universal and included women, only those possessing either Socialist or Communist party or trade union membership cards were allowed to vote. Following the collapse of the Republic of Councils due to the military advancement of the Entente forces, in 1920, the Trianon Peace Treaty imposed a new electoral law on the Hungarian political elite, opening up political space for women and resulting in a new type of challenge of the dichotomy of public and private spheres (Kontler 1999, 341). The first female MP in the Hungarian Parliament, Margit Slachta, used equality arguments together with a maternal framework to express the need for conservative women to extend their power based on the values of the public sphere. She used tactics of petition and coalitional mobilization to preserve the voting rights of women in 1922 when she argued: “we are as much the citizens of this country as the men” (Slachta 1935, 28). In her argument, it was social work that offered women a frame of opportunity to be opened up for public activity since the ideology of separation worked not only for securing support from the mainstream male politicians, but also offered a site for constructing female

subjectivity as an agent of political change in a self-limited frame. This argument undermined and challenged the misogynist tendencies of inter-war Hungarian political life in which “women”, especially the “new women”, were represented as unpredictable and dangerous to the male economic, political and cultural hegemony. The original hopes, nurtured by women mobilized in the maternal frame that women’s presence will bring in peace and purity, were quickly replaced by the stereotype of “women as dangerous” (Slachta 1935, 17). Meanwhile the Hungarian bourgeois feminist movement had been weakened with emigration—a gain for the international women’s movement—and became a submerged network (Taylor 1989), unable to challenge the class-struggle-centered, gender blind political practices of the Social Democrats or the “privatized public sphere” concept of the conservatives. The increasing anti-Semitism and general misogynist tendencies of Horthy Hungary, however, deprived women from any gains in an “alternative public sphere” such as prestige (Pető 2001a).

The “pre-suffrage” women’s movement had been originally characterized by a negligence towards political aims. These associations, organized along charity, alumni, artistic, cultural, and scientific lines were formed with a small, local membership, and were aimed at supporting families with individual charity. The “post-suffrage” women’s associations were different insofar as their political aims and their mass membership are concerned. After 1919, the pre-suffrage associations continued their activity but the new type of associations changed the social space for their activity. The post-suffrage associations built up a strong relationship with the state and they acted in some cases as a “transmission belt” between the policy makers and the citizens.

In the traditional political structure there was not much space for women. The political representations of Hungarian women’s associations were based on two different claims. The first one, such as the liberal Association

of Female Clerks (Nőtisztviselők Országos Egyesülete), demanded *equality* with their male colleagues; the other one was the women's section of the labor movement and the Social Democratic Party. The Social Democrats were strongly representing women's interests and had prominent women members. Anna Kéthly, the greatly respected woman leader of the Social Democrats, was both a member of the Parliamentary Group and the Party Presidium. She advocated in Parliament to pass the bills supporting working women as mothers, giving them economic independence. After the unexpected victory of the Social Democrats in the municipal elections in Budapest in 1925 three women were elected as members of the Budapest City Hall. (One of them, Pollákné Szeréna Stern, remained a member until the end of the period.) Their activity focused mainly on the fight for suffrage as well as social politics, such as daycare, free milk supply, and summer holiday camps. The Hungarian political parties were all electoral parties, with the exception of the Social Democratic Party. Consequently the Social Democratic Party was the only party with a well-organized membership, well-elaborated program and a group of trained and experienced female politicians by 1945. The trade unions, affiliated with the Party, fought for emancipation based on the framework of the equality between sexes.

Besides the social democrats, the much-weakened Association of Feminists was also an initiator and fighter for universal women's suffrage. The Association was also a prisoner of its illusions related to their mission. From their correspondence it is obvious that they considered themselves as the only true representatives of women's interests: "If we do not work with all our strength who will guard our principles?"³ The tone of their meetings was very gloomy: "Very often we feel that we are further from our goal that we had been 30 years ago."⁴ The Feminist Association had a glorious past, a stagnating present and an uncertain future.

The first wave of feminism lasted in Hungary from the early years of the 20th century to 1945

when in the country under Soviet occupation Hungarian women were given the vote without any restrictions. This first wave was initiated by the forces of liberal progression represented by both liberal and social democrats and its fruits, the introduction of limited women's suffrage, were harvested under the very conservative, right wing Horthy regime.

1945–1989: private sphere redefined

1945, the end of WWII and universal suffrage found the re-emerging Association of Hungarian Feminists with an ageing membership and in an isolated position as far as their aims were concerned. The democratization of the country was imposed, again, by an international settlement, and the occupying Red Army and the Communist-led internal politics implemented a gender equality policy through utilizing the concept of "privatized public sphere" using arguments that women earned their place with their achievements on the home front (Pető 2003a). Debates about equality politics were not covering the content of women's participation in politics. Moreover, it was expected by the leadership of the Communist Party that newly enfranchised women should be active in "feminine spheres of politics" such as education and social politics. From this point onward the exclusion from political life was based on political-ideological arguments till 1989. The Association of Hungarian Feminists was banned in 1951, together with a wide range of civic associations, eliminating the social foundation of bourgeoisie through a drastic centralization implemented by the Communists. Women's organizations were merged into one mass organization, whose political role, its ever-changing name notwithstanding, remained the same until the collapse of Communism.

The term "statist feminism" is used describing the nearly 50 years of women's experiences of communist emancipation policy

of the Soviet block (Havelkova 2000). The policy making of the communist countries "mainstreamed" the so-called women's interests in the form of quotas and building up of supporting social welfare institutions. However, the lived experience with the lip-service type of implementation and the manipulative gender politics of the non-democratic regime raised serious doubts from the women's perspective. One of the serious theoretical problems of understanding the statist feminist period related to the uncertainty to this heritage. The general evaluation is blaming this period for the double or rather triple burden imposed on women as a lack of "real" emancipatory potential of the regime. While either, like Hana Havelkova coining the term of "statist feminism" acknowledged not only the half hearted character of the emancipation policy but also the importance of this heritage as a possible basis for further development towards gender equality.

During the state feminist period, gender politics operated on three levels and the content and interchange of these levels determined, to a large degree, women's failure to use the turning point of 1989 as an opportunity to address such widely recognized concerns as discrimination in the workplace and the "double burden" (Nikolchina 2002). The first level was the official ideology of the public sphere, based on the constitution of 1949 in which men and women were declared equal, and followed by the creation of a social welfare network of crèches, nurseries and after-school programs, promoting women's full employment. The second level took place on the plane of private life that remained largely untouched by the Communist egalitarian ideology. This private sphere remained not only fundamentally sexist but also served as a site of resistance against the Communist state interference of human life. The "feminine characteristics" of family centeredness, empathy and sensitivity were celebrated by leading dissent intellectuals as anti-politics.

It is important to note at this point that while the 1956 Hungarian revolution was fought

against Stalinist Communism for national independence and liberty, it was also fought in the context of the post-1945 period of "forced emancipation" or "state feminism". In this regard, we can claim that the revolution of 1956 resulted in the revival of maternal thinking and a conservative backlash in women's politics. This applied even to women actively participating in the revolution, defining them in a maternal frame as mothers or as mourners (Juhász 1999).

The third level operated through the interaction between the public and the private spheres, where the official ideology of equality reinforced the gender stereotypes of the private sphere, arguing for keeping men and women separate as in the well-known emblematic sculpture of Vera Muhina (Nikolchina 2002). The sculpture shows the unity of the working class, represented by a muscular male and the agricultural workers, represented by a young woman wearing a headscarf, emphasizing the weak and separate sphere of women who could only hope for social advancement through the help of men. While most women worked in full-time employment in Hungary, they learned individual adaptation strategies and network building skills while moving between these three levels without constructing a political language which they could have used for voicing their experiences of discrimination outside of the actual framework of individual choice. These strategies only highlighted the fact that women were unable to break through the glass ceiling in politics or the economy and served as an individual choice to avoid confrontation with the male dominated system.

After 1990: towards a new definition?

The founding principles and institutions of Hungary's post-1990 political and social reorganization were constructed in the Round Table discussions and resulted in a historical continuity (Pető 1997). The Hungarian Round

Table discussions were modeled after the Polish example in 1989 and consisted of three sides: representatives of the Communist Party's successor, the opposition and the so-called "third side," representing the various "civil organizations", including the mass Communist Women's Organization. The third side was assisting in the major decisions which laid down the principles and constitutional framework of the new Hungary. The value of democracy, according to Robert Dahl, consists of three elements: competition, participation and civil liberties (Bozóki 2000, 23). In the Round Table discussion participation was not mentioned, because the voluntarist, quasi-democratic characteristic of the pre-1989 political system was counterbalanced by the liberal "non-participatory" democracy.

In 1989 the structure of women's organizations in Hungary followed the same pattern as at the turn of the century or in 1945. Out of the 65 000 non-profit organizations listed in the registry of the Central Statistical Office in 1997, 60 were labeled women's organizations and two of them accepted the label "feminist". At present, the Hungarian feminist movement is confined to a very narrow social spectrum. It is made up predominantly of women intellectuals: sociologists, economists, journalists, and a few historians in their mid-30s and 40s based in university centers. Women's representation remains largely outside of the conventional political framework. Influential pressure groups and some NGOs have been unable to overcome the gap between the "big policy makers" and the voters. Since Hungarian electoral preferences are not settled (25% of the voters are "undecided"), democratic elections may boost interest in women's issues—again from "above". Hence, after 1989, when feminists brought up the lack of a feminist consciousness in Hungary, they encountered deep antipathy among other women in the region. The difference between Hungary and many Western countries lay in the strength of the civil society. As far as NGOs are concerned in the West and the presence of a network of associations and organizations extending

throughout society that could be used by female scholars and academics both as a defensive power-base and as a tool to increase social awareness in gender issues. In Eastern Europe, the abolition of women's associations and the "*Gleichschaltung*" of the women's movements during the Stalinist period not only eliminated any chance of institutional pressure but also resulted in a lack of female politicians capable of representing women's interest in other fields. Women's political socialization took place in the Communist women's mass-organizations, on the grounds of psychological reflexes that were formed by male politicians in order to secure and maintain their political power.

The situation has fundamentally changed with Hungary entering the enlarged European Union and falling under the principle of gender equality in the Maastricht Treaty that requires its implementation via gender mainstreaming. As after the enlargement process the external becomes internal, it also means that the complex realities of post-socialist gender relations will be contributing to the already pressing uncertainties and inconsistencies of EU gender equality norm and its implementation policies which will challenge the provisional facilitating instruments. During the enlargement talks between the EU delegation and the national governments, formal technical criteria were set up as to how to measure and achieve gender equality in these countries without explicitly considering political implications, consequences and costs of these attempts to alter historical patterns of discrimination. During these enlargement talks neither the possible sanction system nor the institutional framework had been defined. The Amsterdam Treaty clearly defines two components of the *acquis* as anti-discrimination legislation and gender equality mechanisms. The governments of the accession countries interpreted the norm of gender equality in the framework of anti-discriminatory legislation and defined the policy site as the employment. The implementation of gender equality policy is problematic due to the translation of the terms as "sexual discrimination", "indirect

discrimination" not only linguistically but also "institutionally". This paradox, that the entrepreneurs of "the East" were complaining about the gender blind practices of their own governments, while the EU gender equality mechanisms in the framework of anti-discriminatory legislation were accepted by the same national political elite, is even more striking if we know the conclusions of recent scholarship on Eastern Europe about the alarming deterioration in the past ten years in women's position in these societies: their public, social and economic roles were diminishing in the past decade (Pető 2003b). The EU gender equality mechanisms are now bringing into question the consensual division between the public and private as a basis of post-1990 Hungarian politics, constructed as a result of "masculinization" (Watson 1993).

"Gender mainstreaming" as one of the policy traditions of EU gender equity mechanism was introduced in Hungary during the EU enlargement talks. The mainstreaming is a "demanding strategy" (Bretherton 2002, 5) because gender mainstreaming policy offers a chance to question deeply embedded cultural values and to review formation of policy issues. Critics, such as Bretherton, underlined that gender mainstreaming as a policy failed to acknowledge differences among women as far as race, ethnicity and class are concerned (Bretherton 2001). Also the EU created the framework to set up institutions to review national gender equality mechanisms; however, it did it in a humble way which is consisting of any sanctions. This framework did go further than the UN Beijing declaration in 1994 obligations as far as governmental level institutionalization of women's politics is concerned. The institutional framework, legislation and the personal experience of political campaigns might create powerful alliances, not only between different EU "femocrats", and also it helps to set up contacts between Hungarian NGOs and international organizations in order to redefine political space.

Conclusion

Both the pre-1919 Hungarian political elite and the Kadar-regime kept its power through controlling the criteria of election. The representation of women's political interests in both cases happened through mainstream political structures controlled by male politicians who sacrificed without hesitation these particular interests in the name of "authentic/alternative public sphere". Women in the democratic opposition of the 1970s and 1980s, the "flying universities" and the *samizdat* publications shared the fate of their foremothers in 1918/19 (Peto 2001b). Moreover, in 1990, women's political participation was also crippled by the heritage of the state feminist period, a drastically decreased participation of women in public life, expressed both in the number of women politicians and the lack of civil society. At this point, in 2004, there is no political force with a vested interest in changing this conveniently subordinate status of women or taking up the representation of women's interests. So it is only a question of time before we get to know if the concept of alternative public sphere contributes to transforming gendered power structures by opening windows of opportunity to Hungarian women in the third Millennium.

NOTES

1. This paper was prepared in the framework of "Reception and Creativity" research project of the Institute of Philosophy, Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 2003.
2. Research for this article had been completed by the time of the publication of the Spring 2003 issue of the *Journal of Women's History*, 15 (1), devoted to "Rethinking Public and Private".
3. Report of Melanie Vambéry, one of the leaders of the Feminist Association in 1928, MOL (Hungarian National Archive) P. 999. 2. 55.
4. Report of Melanie Vambéry in 1934, MOL P. 999. 2. 116.

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