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Anti-Modernist Political Thoughts on Motherhood in Europe in a Historical Perspective¹

After 1989, the demographic crises also reached Hungary in the form of the 'Second Demographic Transition'. At present, women generally follow the late fertility model, and in cities more children are born out of wedlock than to married parents. According to data from the Central Statistical Office in 2006, 35.6 percent of newborns, or 35,500 children, were born out of wedlock. The traditional rhetoric of domesticity, however, has received support from two unexpected places. On the one hand, there is the increase in the traditional public rhetoric of women expected to stay at home and have more children, and some aspects of the recent focus of the EU's rhetoric on demographic crises can be used to support this argument of domesticity (Kakucs/Petö 2008). According to the surveys, Hungary is one of the most family centered societies as far as values and attitudes are concerned, and one of the most individualistic ones as far as fertility practices are concerned (Tóth 1997). This change had already begun in the 1980s, in which on the rhetorical level 'family' as cohabitation and as a social unit comes with prestige while the number of marriages decreases and the number of divorces increases. The collapse of the statist feminist regime, which administratively supported the heterosexual nuclear family as a social unit, only accelerated the process. So how can we account for this contradiction: on the one hand there is the constant decrease in the birth rate (in 1989 123,304, in 2003 94,650) while on the other hand the rhetoric is more traditional than ever?

I would like to answer the question of the demographic rhetoric with reference to the normative motherhood of the Virgin Mary (see Petö 2003, 2003a, 2008). I shall use the term rhetoric as *Begriffsgeschichte* following Koselleck's term as "production and mediations of meaning" (cf. Joyce 1987: 6). I will explore how the meaning of 'motherhood' is produced in the present Hungarian political rhetoric and then expand my argument to other countries in EU.

This paper is based on my participant observations and life story inter-

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views with 23 women activists from the conservative and extreme right wing women's movement in Hungary, where the number of women's organizations with a conservative agenda outnumbers the organizations with a feminist agenda from 1990s onwards (cf. for the results of the project Pető 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2008). (Accession to the EU just sped up this differentiation process inside the women's movement even more.) I would like to connect the rhetoric of the women's movement underlining the common mobilizational roots of the neoconservative and extreme rightist women's movements in Hungary as far as the rhetoric of normative motherhood is concerned.

I would like to argue in this paper that the increasing right wing radicalism and anti-EU sentiments use the rhetoric of Virgin Mary forms of protest, agency and critique the heritage of the communist emancipatory project. I argue that those anti-modernist political movements in Hungary and other parts of Europe use the rhetoric of normative motherhood in order to create a space for critiquing policy measures applied by the EU. To understand this political move, it is important to know that previously, similar to this policy, measures such as work-life balance were used by the failed leftist emancipation project to create a space for the political mobilization of women (Pető 2006a, 2006b).

The phenomenon of increasing right wing populism requires special scholarly attention in Eastern Europe for at least two reasons. First, the extreme right wing radicalism and the existence of oppressed conservatism existed as subcultures: oppressed by the dominant communist political system. Second, major changes happened in the gender relations during communism which were integrated in, appropriated by the programme, rhetoric of the victorious neoconservative politics after 1989 leaving the emancipatory leftist politics in a defensive position (cf. Held 1996; Ramet 1999; Mudde 2000; Pető 2003).

The academic literature is rich on transition from communism to liberal market economy and also on the rise of anti-modernist thoughts, and I would like to build on one line of this literature (see Held 1996; Ramet 1999). This literature argues defining Eastern European 'difference' from a path dependency position. Dividing it from the standpoint of 'Old Europe' points out the changing family structures and demographic characteristics of countries with statist feminist heritage. Using the difference as a descriptive and not as an analytical category diminishes the heuristic potential of this position. Gender studies scholars and experts were quick in explaining the political apathy

towards liberal feminism and the revival of traditional gender values with inherent conservatism and traditionalism of Eastern Europe using the Cold War area studies language. This argument during the enlargement process contributed to the marking process of 'New Europe' as 'the other' painfully resembling some of the characteristics of the colonial discourse inside Europe (Funk 2004).

What are the consequences of this scholarly approach? This approach first prevented the critical assessment of the statist feminist period, the period of state socialism in Soviet occupied Eastern Europe, the failed leftist experiment from assessing its results and advantages. Second, it also doomed the EU policy measures in 'New Europe'. The EU policy follows the same directions and uses the same policy tools as the statist feminist period, the failed leftist emancipatory project with promoting increase in women's employment as a measure and precondition of emancipation and progress. This discrepancy is making room for anti-European sentiments.

Rhetoric and women's movements: normative motherhood and agency

The rhetoric of the emancipatory women's movement: "New Woman" discourse was labeled by Rita Felski in her work *The Gender of Modernity* as "prisoners of progress" (Felski 1995: 11-33). In the rhetoric of the women's movement, women represent the new beginning, imagining future in a linear development as a normative project. The historical meta-narrative about women's past is hierarchical and exclusive while it aims to forge counter-identity. The discourse of the emancipatory women's movement is a strategic discourse which is emotionally charged. Its language creates collective subjectivity with shared rituals, symbols of meanings and stories. The post-1989 women's movement, born on the ruins of the failed leftist emancipation project in Eastern Europe, reached back to the symbols, rituals and stories of the pre-1945 period. This led to the emergence of research on the Feminist Association and Rosika Schwimmer as forerunners of women's emancipation as a way of establishing political legitimacy (Petö 2007). The present day right wing women's organizations are reaching back for symbols, for legitimization and for discourse to the central figure of the politics of motherhood, to the Virgin Mary, so there is an order to fill the historical continuity gap in politi-

cal ideology caused by 50 years of communism. I argue together with Roger Griffin, who pointed out "fascism itself can be seen as a political variant of modernism" (Griffin 2007: 6). So the anti-modernist emancipation is a necessary consequence and parallel rival to the modernist women's movements.

Analyzing the historical continuity, we observe that the cult of the Virgin Mary served to collect the anti-communist forces both in Italy and in Hungary right after World War II. Slovakia, Poland and Croatia can be added to this list. As Blackbourn argued, symbols of the cult of the Virgin Mary "were a rival set of emblems" to the flags, anthems and monuments of the modern nation-state (Blackbourn 2001: 27). The criticism towards existing modern political Catholicism developed parallels with the social democratic movement from the second half of the 19th century. Therefore, in interwar Hungary these two political platforms were also represented in the Hungarian parliament by women. Female MPs signaled that the political parties considered women's issues and women's votes important. The two mobilizational frames constructed two different women's movements: the social democratic, leftist and the Christian movements. Victoria De Grazia underlined in the case of Italy the richness of Catholic civic organizations under fascism, against both liberalism and modernity that ironically underlay the rise of fascism itself (Grazia 1992: 243-244). Also in Hungary during the interwar Horthy regime, political Catholicism and the different women's organizations served as a site of resistance to the emerging fascist Arrow Cross women's mobilizational attempts (Pető 2003). After 1945, the social democrats found the newly emerging Communist Party supported by the Red Army in Hungary, also the revival of political Catholicism. For the opening of the Year of Our Great Lady on 17th August, 1948 the Director of *Actio Catholica*, Zsigmond Mihalovics declared the purpose of the year as "a quest for us for spiritual renewal, intellectual orientation, social forces, and the sources of national life" (Mihalovics 1947: 1). 1948 was declared the year of the Virgin Mary by Cardinal Mindszenty, head of the Catholic church in Hungary, which

"aimed at deepening the traditional cult of Mary and strengthening the religious consciousness [...] not a question which is directly related to politics was mentioned on these days of Mary" (Mindszenty 1982: 176).

The same political and rhetorical fight happened in Italy around the cult of the Virgin Mary after World War II (Ventresca 2003).

The re-emerging cult of the Virgin Mary in Hungary in the post-1989 context also served as an alternative political 'set of emblems'. The same type of *Kulturkampf* has started. I would like to illustrate this rivaling set of emblems with the political rhetoric.

The emerging cult of the Virgin Mary as a set of emblems and a political rhetoric is also interesting in the framework of resisting communism.

During communism, the stereotypical women's characteristics as intimacy, sensitivity, family centeredness were labeled as a resistance to 'state-ist feminism', because these characteristics were relativised by the 'state feminism'. The private resistance to communism was based on restoring the so-called 'female virtues' in the family, based on the cult of the Virgin Mary, which aims to preserve family values in private life against the pseudo-equality of state socialism (Petö 2003; Petö/Szapor 2004). The experiment of the social democrats to support autonomous women's political existence failed. The wives of communist functionaries were not visible, playing the part of the wife supporting the husband, so they were not able to construct alternative role models. Therefore, the untouched patriarchal framework with the normative cult of motherhood survived communist intervention into the family policy and reemerged as a victorious interpretative frame after 1989. The state-ist feminist failed to produce an alternative civic set of emblems. The previously dominant Christian iconographical patterns about women remained unchanged despite the efforts of the promoting female labourer as an independent individual. By the end of the 1990s, it also became clear that the "masculinization of Eastern Europe" (Watson 1993) did not bring the revival of feminism, nor women's movements with a feminist agenda in Eastern Europe. The number of conservative and/or religious women's organizations in former Eastern European countries outnumbers organizations with explicit feminist agendas. Therefore, the analysis of why these movements are popular is a political and academic imperative today.

The Hungarian version of the Virgin Mary, the 'Woman Dressed in Sun' as a site of resistance

I used different qualitative research methods as life story interviews, discourse analyses to explore the historical roots of extreme right wing mobilization in Hungary who explicitly support the idea of normative motherhood. First, I

analyzed the publications and the striking theme of the Virgin Mary. Among the authors of books on these topics we find disproportionately more women. In 2000 I also used the participant observation method and attended several public lectures on the Far Eastern origins (Aryan, Sumer) of Hungarians analyzing the social composition of those who are very active in lectures. I also participated in events organized by the numerous right wing civil organizations aiming to recover the historical 'Truth' about the origins of the Hungarian tribes conquering the Carpathian basin in the 9th century A.C. In the case of this gender ideology, the facts related to the Far Eastern origins of the Hungarians are not as important as the belief in their interpretation of selected historical facts. They reject the Finno-Ugric origin of the Hungarians and advocate that the imagined oriental homeland of Hungarians was not in the Ural Mountain but in Persia. The legitimacy of this discourse refers to the sins committed by the communist politicians of science who did not support research on this field, which is according to them, the cause of the present ignorance. The language of Far Eastern origins of the Hungarians is a minority discourse; it was developed against the majority oppression and offers points of identification for the participants. A typical argument says: "The Sumer language is the ancestor of the Hungarian, those who are dealing with this issue without a prejudice will not question this." (Bobula 2000: 177)

The research direction of the origins of the Hungarians was decided in an unprecedented way in the history of science with a decree of Minister of Education Ágost Trefort in 1877 when he proposed to subsidize only research which would point towards the Finno-Ugric origin. After 1945, Hungary was under Soviet occupation so again that gave a special political push to prove uncritically the Finno-Ugric relationship. The anti-communist Hungarian emigration mostly in Canada, Australia and South America financed research proving the Aryan and Far Eastern roots of the Hungarians opposing internationalism. Hungarian immigrants who left Hungary in 1945 or in 1956 living in Latin America, Canada and Australia played an important role in shaping the political rhetoric.

The results of the participant observation I conducted also show an astonishing overrepresentation of women in events covering historical, linguistic and artistic aspects of the Far Eastern origins of the Hungarians. I formulated the question: why so many women got mobilized to listen to quasi-academic counter-discourse about the imagined and occult origins of the Hungarian tribes while the gender rhetoric of these talks supported the traditional hierar-

chical gender regimes: women should stay in the domestic sphere and produce children.

This paradox of how a woman might be active in public when the public expectation is that she has to stay passive was solved with the post-1990 revival of the cult of the Virgin Mary as a cult of maternity. This normative cult of motherhood aims not only to strengthen 'the nation' but also regulates the order in the relationship between the two sexes. It has a potential of regulating extreme forms of masculinities (e.g. violence against women) which might be considered as a possible form of agency for women. I would like to narrow further my topic to focus only on the question of whether women's agency can be found in discourses of right wing extremism as an explanation for their political mobilization.

In order to explain why the figure of the Virgin Mary is crucial both for the Hungarian political discourse and for the understanding of the different levels of women's political agency, I need to focus on the normative cult of motherhood. Motherhood is a social construct (Taylor 1996: 195) which is legitimized in three public discourses: religious (role of Mary as mother of Christ as a normative pattern for women's activity in the public sphere), military (identifying the body of the nation with the body of women) and quasi-scientific (women are the weaker sex who are the only ones to bear children) discourses. In the following, to explain why the cult of the Virgin Mary unites all right wing political forces in Hungary, I mention three discursive methods to analyze the cult of Mary in the religious discourse: the analyses of the female psyche, the feminist theology and the patchwork cult of the Virgin Mary. I use the definition of Clifford Geertz for religion as a cultural system:

"Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if most often implicit) metaphysical, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other." (Geertz 1993: 90)

From this point of view it is crucial to understand women's experience in the religious discourse and practice around the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Hungarian context. After 1998, conservative women were experimenting with the construction of a new non-party framework. Following the example of the influential pre-1945 women's institution, they formed an umbrella organization, the Alliance of Hungarian Women at the Turn of the Century (MAESZ), which aimed to unite all conservative women's NGOs. A new political party

was also formed for women, the Party of Hungarian Women, which labeled the preexisting political party framework inappropriate to represent the interest of national-conservative women. The changing structural framework of Hungarian right wing women active in politics can also be traced in the different religious and spiritual movements such as the Hungarian catholic renewal movements, e.g. *Regnum Marianum*. These movements not only oppose globalization in their programme but they also fight for the revival of the Hungarian female saints of the Arpad dynasty. The renewal of the cult of the Great Lady of the Hungarians, which is not the Virgin Mary, also contributes to the spiritual revival bonding together the Catholics and the Protestants because it offers a social space for women to harmonize maternal and political duties in an approved patriarchal framework in the syncretic belief of the Virgin Mary and pagan cult of 'Woman Dressed in Sun'.

As far as the women's politics of the national right wing political parties are concerned, they all put the normative cult of motherhood in the center. In the political language these parties have no 'women's politics' but 'family politics', which covers the social role of women by models offered by the cult of Mary. The liberal-leftist criticism opposing the normative cult of motherhood offers women's individual human rights and the right to choose motherhood. This option includes the right to reject maternity, which in the conservative discourse is regarded as 'national' sabotage. During the newly emerging pro-natalist campaigns, the rhetoric of the "6 million unborn Hungarians" during the fifty years of communist rule in Hungary became a permanent part of the campaigns (Pető 2002) when reproductive practices were different. Reproductive rights in Hungary were regulated following the intervention of the Constitutional Court, which stirred public debates. The reproductive rights were regulated by a decree which was labeled as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in 1991. The public debates concluded in the legislation of reproductive rights in 1992 named as the law of protecting fetal life. The law neither satisfied the feminists, who considered it a violation of women's human rights to have the fetus in the centre of the legislation and not the mother, nor Christian and extreme right wing groups, who still considered the law too permissive and consequently anti-patriotic. In 1998 the Constitutional Court set a deadline of June 30, 2000 to the Parliament to define 'serious crises' which in the text of the law opened up the possibility for the pregnant woman to decide. While leftist liberal parties advocated protecting the human rights of the mother, the conservative right wing political forces demanded more

state intervention in diminishing the 'serious crises' (Petö 2003: especially 187-199). During the newly emerging pro-natalist campaigns the rhetoric about the "6 million unborn Hungarians" during the fifty years of communist rule in Hungary became a permanent part of the campaigns when reproductive practices were different (Petö 2002).

Conclusions

The Hungarian right wing women's politics is characterized by the quest for spirituality after 50 years of official atheism and with a strong involvement of historical churches. The appropriation of the different layers of the cult of the Virgin Mary is a reaction to the profound social, economic and cultural changes of the transition, which opened up room for agency for ordinary people and church hierarchy. It is also a response to the collapse of communism, and a criticism towards neoliberal globalization returning to the pre-modern set of values and practices. The complex patchwork cult of the Virgin Mary offers a position of agency and victorious victim-hood of communism at the same time without the pressing moral need of examining different forms of collaboration with communism in the past fifty years. The success can be explained by the openness and flexibility of the political rhetorical frame of the Virgin Mary that it offers space for sometimes competing aspirations.

Victoria de Grazia used the term 'post political citizenship' to analyze fascist Italy, where she stated that the identity politics served as a strategy for resistance and agency (Grazia 2000: 356). In contemporary Europe it is key to question how women's identities were formed and what contents are placed there.

The question for Hungary is how the conservative (meaning non-leftist) women's unity will be implemented, where the different sometimes-contradictory right wing discourses are represented by different political parties. The symbol of the Great Lady of Hungarians offers a possible site for uniting the different elements as Catholic, Protestant, ancient Hungarian, Sumer and Indian, which could also serve as a site for questioning patriarchy from an essentialist position still having critical potential. The patchwork character of the cult of the Virgin Mary cannot resist the revolutionary reconceptualisation based on occultism. This new occult redefinition could be questioned only with order and hierarchy arguments, which means that this will diminish the

potential agency of conservative women in Hungary in the near future while it forces women to accept hierarchical arguments. As Judith Butler said:

“One thinks one is opposing Fascism, only to find that the identificatory source of one’s own opposition is Fascism itself, and that Fascism depends essentially on the kind of resistance one offers.” (Butler 2000: 173)

It will be very difficult to conceptualize the forms of resistance to the normative definitions of motherhood if the EU discourse on motherhood does not move away from the rhetorical and political trap described in this article.

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