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Reproductive Rights as Battlefield in the New Cold War

A Historical Comparison of Illiberal Gender Politics Regarding Reproductive Rights in Hungary

Andrea Pető

1. Introduction

When delegates of the German Bundestag are expected to respond to a proposal by the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to stop funding gender studies programs in German universities,¹ or when MEPs in the European Parliament spend hours explaining the meaning of gender to Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, it becomes obvious that gender has become a symbolic and a very real battlefield – a Cold War – also in international politics.² The term Cold War here refers to the process of stigmatization and exclusion of one part of the population by another along political and symbolic lines more generally. It is thus not connected to one specific historical period called ‘the Cold War after 1945’, but rather to processes of building images of enemies. This concept of Sexual Cold War has been defined by Essig and Kondrakov (2019) as a *modus operandi* rather than as a descriptive dividing line between different imagined geographical locations like East or West or South and North. In this respect, Essig and Kondrakov point out that

there are discursive regimes in both places that perform this polarized space. Since these ideological formations are so clearly dispersed in space, we caution readers not to think of the New Sexual Cold War as geographically lo-

1 <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2020/kw51-de-gender-forschung-812898>

2 <https://euobserver.com/political/150395>

cated and therefore not a way to divide the world further into an ‘us vs. them’ (Essig/Kondrakov 2019: 83).

Another central concept of this paper is “gender as symbolic glue” (Grzebal-ska/Kováts/Pető 2017), meaning that the concept of gender has been used to mobilize very different political forces to unite in shared hatred for one enemy – gender-studies scholars and practitioners. It has also become a central rhetorical tool of these efforts to define what ‘common sense’ means to a wider audience to create a new consensus about what is ‘normal’ and ‘legitimate’, thus normalizing extreme right positions. This kind of social mobilization incites hatred against ‘gender ideology’ and ‘political correctness’ and thus not only demonizes the worldviews of its opponents and rejects the liberal human rights paradigm that has long been the basis of a European-North American consensus. The novelty is that now “gender as symbolic glue” also provides a viable and appealing alternative to neoliberalism that seems realistic and acceptable to many by focusing on family, nation, religious values, and freedom of speech – concepts often weaponized in contemporary culture wars. That explains the unquestionable popularity of the Orbán regime in Hungary in three consecutive general elections.

Are we witnessing a new Cold War between liberal and illiberal forces waged on “gender as symbolic glue” on a global scale? Attacks on reproductive rights fill the headlines, as do government-sponsored billboards promoting motherhood and condemning abortion. Meanwhile the allegedly mainstream right-wing governments increasingly adopt positions previously espoused only by the far-right, creating a dangerous void in the center of the political spectrum. White mothers with cute White babies are smiling down from expensive billboards advertising motherhood from Hungary to Poland, from Germany to Denmark, from Russia to Serbia. Is the ethnocentric pronatalism of today comparable to the pronatalism of the interwar period in its rhetoric and mobilizational potential? Using the method of historical comparisons, what can we learn from the past for the future? In the literature on interwar Europe, there is consensus about the trigger moment for the rise of far-right movements: the financial crisis of 1929. Should the triple crises – financial, security, and ‘refugee’ – of the years following 2008 and/or the COVID-19 pandemic be considered as our era’s trigger moments?

This chapter tries to give an answer to these troubling questions with a historical comparative analysis of the different phases of contestations of reproductive rights – abortion policy and promoting motherhood – based on

interviews with activists, using Hungary as an exemplary case. The chapter is structured as follows: After I explain why Hungary has become the leader of the global conservative revolution, I describe the analytical frame, before finally comparing the three different political periods along the lines of communication, the role of religion, rhetoric, and measurement of success, among other issues.

2. The case study: Hungary as global leader of the ‘conservative revolution’?

Hungary, to the great surprise of many, plays a leading role in the international arena as one of the initiators of international treaties and conferences to redefine human rights (Juhász/Pető 2021: 168-190). This soft power activity earned this small and poor Central European country a permanent place in the headlines of international media. It also created the illusion that Hungary is a major player in international politics and a leading force behind what the Orbán government calls a “new conservative revolution” waged against liberalism and the values of 1968, including sexual freedom and reproductive rights (Pető/Vasali 2014: 60-75).

But it is not only this kind of international activity for which Hungary receives attention. Hungary has initiated yet another international collaboration and became the supporter of the World Congress of Families (WCF), a global umbrella organization.

The WCF has already organized four so-called Demographic Summits, where politicians gathered to share strategies on raising birth rates in response to decreasing and ageing populations. In October 2020, the Hungarian Government, together with five other countries, co-sponsored a virtual gathering for the signing of the Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women’s Health and Strengthening the Family. This document is meant to be an alternative to the Istanbul Convention Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) mechanism. The Geneva Consensus Declaration was signed by 32 countries firsthand and stated that

there is no international right to abortion, nor any international obligation on the part of States to finance or facilitate abortion, consistent with the long-standing international consensus that each nation has the sovereign

Figure 1: Market hall of ideas and mobilizing techniques



Source: Author's photo taken at the World Congress of Families, 24-28 May 2017, Budapest

right to implement programs and activities consistent with their laws and policies.³

The document raises questions whether the Hungarian government plans to introduce restrictions in abortion rights, even when the number of abortions is not only steadily declining, but are also linked to social inequality. Surveys show that it is mainly poor, underage women, and women who already have multiple children who consider abortion as the only affordable means of birth control since social security systems do not support any form of birth control.⁴

In the following, I will address these conservative propositions by comparing the failed promises of conservative propositions of the 1930s with neoliberal modernity, or the failed promises of 1989. Both failed political propositions opened the door for another, an illiberal, political proposition which is attractive to so many women. Reproductive policies form constitutive parts

3 <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/10/22/trump-administration-marks-signing-geneva-consensus-declaration.html>

4 Data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office on Pregnancy Terminations, 2016. <https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/pdf/terhessegmegsz16.pdf>

of illiberal politics for which ‘gender serves as symbolic glue’ for mobilizing otherwise politically very distant political forces with hate and exclusion.

3. Empirical base

My analysis is based on three earlier research projects in order to formulate the comparative argument regarding reproductive rights. In my previous work, I compared 1930s narratives of women about their mobilization for far-right movements with the situation in Hungary today (Pető 2020a: 277-293).

First is a set of testimonies of women charged as war criminals in front of the People’s Tribunals after WWII in Hungary (Pető 2020). The People’s Tribunals were legal institutions expected to mark the end of a dark era, though they were generally lenient toward female perpetrators because of the court’s gender bias. Still, the women’s narratives presented to the court offer rare insights into the mobilization of the far-right Hungarian-nationalist Arrow Cross Party that was in power from 1944 to 1945. Based on these files, I reconstructed the motives and beliefs of several far-right women – intellectuals, relatives of party functionaries, administrators, wives, artists, and outright criminals – who supported the Arrow Cross Party. They rejected the mainstream “conservative proposition” of the interwar Horthy regime (Sipos 2020), as its discourse was pushing women back to kitchen and family, which was unappealing to wage-earning and professional women. These women of the Arrow Cross also rejected the leftist emancipation project of trade unions, communists, and social democrats, since they supported the anti-Semitic, anti-communist rhetoric of the Horthy government, which blamed Jews and communists for the loss of World War I.

My second set of data is drawn from interviews I conducted in the early 2000s with prominent female members of the then emerging far-right subculture: activists, members of parliament, intellectuals, journalists, elected representatives in municipalities (Pető 2003). And I interviewed women who became key figures of the newly blossoming conservative and far-right neo-Nazi women’s movements about their views on reproductive rights. This period was the gilded age of neoliberalization of Hungary just before entering/joining the European Union in 2004.

At this time, these women were neither taken seriously by their own party members, nor by their ideological opponents. When I approached them for interviews, they were surprised and proud, hoping to gain both the historical

significance and visibility they lacked in public spaces through the interview process. I recorded the narratives of women who were sharing their stories with me, a well-known, progressive intellectual, who they knew belonged to a different political community. To avoid the pitfalls of being considered as a potential convert, I occupied the position of a learner: I wanted to learn about their motivations for entering politics and the far-right. By now, these anonymized interviewees have become prominent members of the political establishment of Hungary, but we still have polite small talk if we meet. I therefore consider these interviews to have been mutually beneficial, a process in which the views, dignity and agency of the interviewees have been acknowledged.

The third set of data I collected together with Borbála Juhász in 2020. We interviewed women's activists against reproductive rights (Juhász/Pető 2021: 168-190). We would have loved to reach out to all representatives of this diverse spectrum as it presented itself in 2000, but on the conservative and illiberal side, we were only able to conduct interviews with women that we had already known personally or professionally before and with whom we had developed a relationship of trust.

As described, the empirical material was collected not only in different periods, but from different backgrounds, as well: the testimonies before the People's Court are different from the often passionate and profound interviews given to a novice researcher in the early 2000s, while in 2020, in the polarized 'Kulturkampf' [culture war], civil servants and activists supporting the illiberal state did not dare sit down to be interviewed by a CEU professor. Yet it is worth comparing the three historical situations along the following lines, because it illustrates the evolution of illiberal thinking on reproductive rights.

At first glance, the interviews I conducted in Hungary twenty years apart offer insights into one overarching process in history: the neoliberalization of Eastern Europe. However, the 2008 international financial crises marked the end of one era and the dawn of another, including globalizing illiberalism, surprisingly with Hungary as a global actor that creates alternatives to the dominating liberal world order.

Neoliberalization ostensibly supports a narrow and market-oriented version of gender equality; it has simultaneously dismantled the welfare state, undermined social solidarity, and rejected structural reforms that would be needed to reach genuine equality. The result is a system which accepts some token women in positions of power, but leaves masses of women behind. Con-

sequently, progress in reaching gender equality has stagnated in the last two decades, adding to a general feeling of frustration and disappointment with equality politics in general. This has led many women to doubt the sincerity of the equality paradigm itself (especially within the paradigms of neoliberal policy), and to seek alternative forms of empowerment in anti-modernist and nationalist projects such as familialism or far-right extremism. In a similar way, Nazi and fascist parties as early as in interwar Europe were able to attract considerable support by women voters in the interwar years as they offered support, security and economic opportunity in a society with growing inequalities, counterbalancing the failed promises of the Weimar era. The interviewed activists in all three (1930s, 2000s, 2020s) periods aimed to create a viable and appealing alternative consisting of values, institutions and symbolic systems as a form of critique of oppressive, hierarchical gender regimes connected to European forms of modernity. Their agendas cut across traditional right/left political dividing lines to challenge an existing party system. The way they envisioned these alternatives reflected the weaknesses and mistakes of their era's progressive politics. And, of course, far-right politics today (as in the 1930s) has unquestionably increased its electoral support among women during the last decade. Comparing the results of the three cycles of interviews with the 1930s in terms of the popularity of far-right politics, the lessons point towards the same radicalization on which the 1930s so tragically ended. Therefore, the present comparative analysis explores the interview material along different issues.

In this section, I compared the three historical periods along different issues. The old and new Cold War(s), which use(s) gender as a symbolic glue, can be analyzed from different angles (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of comparison

	1930s	2000	2020
Political language	radicalized	polarized	antagonistic
Communication	enchanted	uncertain	enchanted
Reaction to systemic, structural issues	economic crisis	hopes of neoliberalization	neoliberal neopatriarchy
Main area of contestation	women's employment	culture and history	reproductive rights maternal rights care crisis
Rhetoric	emancipatory (class) exclusivist (race)	religion as an arena for antimodernist emancipation	exclusivist hegemonic (race and class)
Relationship to the state	protest the state and its redistributive model	beginning of institutionalization with state support	benefiting from welfare policies, institutionalization of the state
Measurement of success	increasing membership, women's mobilization	emerging counter-culture	EU funded generous family subsidies
Religion	anti-establishment, rhetorical appropriation of religious vocabulary	support of a religious revival	benefitting from religious institutional takeover
Levels	local mobilization to build up national network bottom up	national mobilization top down	top-down building up national and transnational networks

4. Disillusionment as a productive force

In all three cases, there was a systemic dissatisfaction with the previous political, social and economic system. In 2000, before EU accession, there were more illusions regarding Hungary and former communist countries catching up with 'Old Europe' in terms of standard of living. The female political extremists I interviewed described the post-1989 neoliberalization of East-

ern Europe as a failed promise. Their stories followed the same line: They expressed concerns about the increase of poverty and discrimination and interspersed them with anti-elitist slogans. Compensation for loss was a common storyline in all interviews. Women joining far-right movements after 1989, even those from families who did not suffer persecution during communism, unanimously narrated their family stories before 1989 as lists of losses. All the interviewed women were proud of their family and their children and found, for example, discourses of women as victims of domestic violence and/or discrimination difficult to identify with – even when they acknowledged them, or in some cases had even experienced discrimination and/or violence themselves. However, reproductive rights were considered as given and unproblematic. One of them even shared with me the story about an abortion she herself had undergone, which caused serious conflict, as she came from a religious family, suffered persecution during communism, and now was active in the women's section of a conservative, Christian political party. Women who were politically mobilized complained about the dominance of the imported neoliberalized language of the women's movement that offered them no space to address their issues. Therefore, they were looking for another political proposition, which turned out to be the illiberal one.

5. Different levels of action and different citizenships

Attacks on reproductive rights, for which 'gender is becoming a glue' to unite very different forces globally, are happening on different levels: transnational (organization, institution), national (government policies) and local, as the redefinition of reproductive rights led also to localization of political and policy debates (Kováts/Pető, 2017: 117-133). Banning access to abortion at the national level is pointless if there is a brave midwife in a given area who ensures that women can control their fertility, even if international guidelines such as CEDAW are ineffective. Even a national legal framework for abortion can be disabled if certain hospitals in Poland and Hungary receive EU funding via their respective governments to improve their gynecology departments only on the condition that they do not perform abortions, i.e. that they become 'family-friendly'. At the local level, when a public hospital in Hungary or a small municipality in Poland can declare itself to be outside the jurisdiction of universal human rights, international treaties, EU directives or national law without any real legal or practical consequences, a new conceptualization

of citizenship is required, because certain citizens have access to public goods while others do not. The relationship between the state and its citizens has changed fundamentally, as selective access – instead of a universal one – has become the main principle and the way of governance.

The way abortion has been re-regulated through policy measures fits into a wider context of this illiberal family policy (Petó/Svégel forthcoming). In Hungary, we are already observing new developments in this area. There, similar to Poland, the government has introduced several family policy measures with the aim of incentivizing marriage, joint loans to bind spouses together, and encouraging couples to have children. These are elements of classical leftist, redistributive welfare politics. While Poland is moving towards a guaranteed basic income, Hungary is using policy measures to increase consumption based on subsidized state loans.

The related policy package in Hungary is called the Family Protection Action Plan. In this framework, a seven-point program was announced in 2019. Framed in the title as “Hungary’s response to demographic decline”, this plan contained the following measures: preferential loans to women under the age of 40 for their first marriage; extension of the loan program supporting home ownership (CSOK) – allowing purchase of resale homes, car purchase subsidies for large families, mortgage repayment of up to one million forints for families with two or more children, a lifetime exemption from personal income tax for women raising at least four children, a (thus far unrealized) pledge to establish 21,000 new childcare facilities over three years, and subsidized parental leave for grandparents looking after young children (Kremmer 2020: 19–44). The family support system mainly benefits the rich and is actually designed to stimulate consumption by increasing the population’s dependency on loans.

After having analyzed the similarities between the three historical periods, it is necessary to look at the differences between them.

6. Communication

The first difference between the two latter historical periods is an increasing level of violence in communication: In early 2000, there was a space for debates, which by now has disappeared. Government funded media outlets harassing pro-choice activists and academics is now commonplace. This ‘public-targeted online harassment’ (Abby Ferber 2018) attempts to dismantle the

notion that research and education are public goods and human rights (Pető 2020b: 9-24). Pro-life activists are using random surveys, instrumentalizing academic authority to prove their ideological points. In the 2000s, this was not the case, and not much state money was pumped into the newly founded government financed NGOs called GONGOs (government sponsored NGOs).

Another difference that can be observed in the interviews relates to the new political language used by the interviewees. In the most recent interviews, gender serves as a symbolic glue which works with the concept of hate. But in a wider framework, the new conceptualization and instrumentalization of the term 'gender' are also challenging the previous disenchanting language of politics. When the language of gender equality became part of enlightened modernity, it lost its emotional potential. Max Weber (1919) dedicated very few lines to one of his key concepts in his lecture *Entzauberung der Welt*, published later as "Wissenschaft als Beruf". In this paper, Weber elaborated on intellectualism and rationalism as key characteristics of Western/Eurocentric modernity when religious authorities and mystical explanations ceased to rule the world. The disappearance of enchantment – or the process of disenchantment – has consequences for languages and technologies of politics. Before, belonging to a political community was deterministic and governed by magical forces. The Age of Enlightenment brought objectivity, choice and rational political actors. In this respect, disenchantment was a constitutive part of capitalism as a productive system built on rationality. Regarding the criticism of this rational system, Ernest Gellner (1975: 431-445) wrote about re-enchantment as a process initiated by psychoanalysis, Marxism and phenomenology, to list but some of them. Interestingly enough, Joan Scott, in her groundbreaking paper "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986) also mentioned these three intellectual roots of the category of gender: Marxism, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis. All three intellectual roots have troubled histories in Eastern Europe, so it is no surprise that after 1989, 'gender' arrived with these three "wrong" concepts (Marxism, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism) in an inappropriate conceptual vehicle (Smejkalova 1996: 97-102). These unsuitable vehicles as foundations of the concept of gender are the other reason why gender could serve as a symbolic glue as it opens space for wider contestations.

7. Religion

The attitude of women towards religion as an institution differs significantly in the different study periods. On the ethical question of the legitimacy of abortion, the churches held the same view in all three periods, but against a fundamentally different setting. The extreme right-wing women's movement of the 1930s was fundamentally anti-elitist, and the elite of the Horthy regime was inextricably linked to the establishment of the Christian churches. At the same time, it was not only because of the Nazis' cult of paganism, but also because of the presence of a world of faith that Christianity was identified with Judaism among the Hungarian extreme right.

After 1945, the Communist Party declared war on religion in Red Army-occupied Hungary. As part of this, the churches' considerable assets were confiscated, they were excluded from education and non-collaborating priests were imprisoned. After 1989, reparations to the churches began to be paid, but it was only after 2010 that this process accelerated rapidly. After seventy years of official atheism, the historical churches slowly regained their place, and let us add, their wealth, in Hungary. This took place under the two Fidesz governments (1998-2002, and from 2010) and women's organizations played a major role in this. In the interviews of the year 2000, conservative traditionalist and extreme right-wing pagan views were all present in the women's organizations. By the year 2020, this similarity intensified, and in the meantime, traditional conservative Christianity was being eroded as it became more and more an alliance under the Fidesz government in exchange for financial benefits.

8. Agenda setting from employment rights to reproductive rights

Today, reproductive rights are contested in their function as part of gender as a symbolic glue. This was not the case in the early 2000s, when even the most fundamentalist religious actors or neo-Nazis were not questioning the right to abortion. Another difference is that today, unlike in the year 2000, important public professional and political debates are taking place on the issues of childbirth and birth control in Hungary – and that various NGOs and GONGOs are involved in these debates. Now, the debate evolves around two issues: First, about corruption, obstetric violence, and the rights of mothers in the over-medicalized, soulless, and defunded Hungarian healthcare system

(Kremmer 2020: 19-44). The second political debate on abortion is generated by growing American Christian fundamentalist anti-abortion voices.

Figure 2: Protest by activists at the WCF



Source: Author's photo taken at the World Congress of Families, 24-28 May 2017, Budapest. The banner says: Anyaszomorítók, which can be literally translated as "You are making your mothers sad". In colloquial English it would be "motherfuckers".

This second debate is about importing the "heartbeat" principle into Hungary, which means that a pregnancy cannot be terminated once the fetus's first heartbeat is detected. Backed by taxpayers' money, this discourse aims to question the legitimacy of birth control. Both the professional and the political conflict seem to foster a re-regulation of birth control (cf. Pető/Svégel, forthcoming). The role of transnationalism is decreasing in parallel with the weakening of Europe's normative power. During this paradigm shift, the importance of locality is increasing. In 2020, the emerging maternal rights movements fighting against violence in gynecological wards turned out to be the most influential movement. It positioned itself outside the traditional political left-right divide and received much more support than NGOs with a traditional, secular, human rights agenda. The transnational and the national intersects with the local when local hospitals receive funding from the European Union to modernize their women's health departments. However, locally,

this financial support is restricted by the condition that no abortions may be performed at the facility.

9. Success of a counter-social movement

For the 1930s, the success of a social movement can only be measured in the number of women mobilized. In this regard, it can be considered a success for the Arrow Cross organizations that women made up 30% of its membership. At this time, the organizations proposed to regulate masculinity by way of castration as a punishment for men who drank and failed to provide for their families. However, since the Arrow Cross formed a government in the very last period of the war, when Hungary was a battleground, these decrees were never implemented.

During the first Fidesz government in the 2000s, the number of women's organizations increased. But this period also saw the creation of the infrastructure which then gave rise to the illiberal state after 2010. Finally, the crisis of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the different fault lines to which the illiberal forces had a clear and ready response. These politics contribute to the undeniable political and electoral success of these illiberal parties because they have been consolidating and maintaining popular support with different family policy subsidies – which are partly financed with EU funding.

10. Conclusions

In this chapter, I argued that a new phase of neoliberalism has emerged after 2008, which has changed the previous context and content regarding reproductive rights. Eric Fassin (2018, no page number) refers to it as a “neofascist phase of neoliberalism”. Since resources are scarce, they are taken from wherever they are available, which also explains why illiberalism is so popular among women. Women have joined far-right parties and movements as a form of resistance to the conservative patriarchy sabotaging women's participation in the public sphere, as well as to demand acknowledgement for their unpaid care work at home. Reproductive rights, maternalism and the family as an institution can be a resource when no other resources are available. For immigrant women, family and kinship very often are the only resources, because of the dysfunctional state apparatus.

Still, neither structural phenomena caused by the triple crises of 2008, which are arguably similar to the 1929 crisis, nor a supposed silent majority gaining a voice, nor the Deleuzian theory that the driving force towards fascism is a need for security, can fully explain the gendered *modus operandi* of today's illiberal states (Grzebalska/Pető 2018:164-172). Much of the previous analysis may fall within this (right-wing) "backlash" framework, which is widely shared by academia, gender experts, feminists and LGBTQI* activists. (Grabowska 2014) However, there is also growing left-wing criticism of the – often also left-wing – backlash discourse (Kovács/Zacharenko 2020). With a special focus on East-Central Europe, this criticism seeks to examine regional differences and to move away from ideological oppositions to understand how neoliberal economic policies have affected women, and why this region has become susceptible to such attacks on equal rights. As Eszter Kovács (2017) argues, the EU human rights paradigm focuses on the individual rights of women, but does not mitigate the injustices that arose from the economic order that developed after the transition of 1989 or the austerity policies that followed the 2008 crisis – which affected the everyday lives of women. She argues that such attacks represent a cultural pushback against social changes, such as gender equality, sexual rights, abortion, in-vitro and assisted fertility treatments, interpretations of the causes of violence against women in line with the Istanbul Convention, gay and trans rights and same-sex marriage, and adoption by same-sex couples, resulting in a critique of modernity, or a 'conservative revolution'.

In Central Europe, the pre-World-War-II patriarchal system coexisted comfortably with the post-World-War-II communist system in terms of everyday habitual practices and reproductive dogmas (Pető 2015). The idea of the woman as a mother never left the political rhetoric, even at the peaks of the 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. Beatrix Campbell (2014: 4) used the term "neo-patriarchal neoliberalism" ("an ugly name for an ugly deal") to describe increased gender inequalities and the related policies on the one hand, and a work/employment dichotomy as a foundational relationship for neoliberal reconstruction on the other hand. As in progressive emancipatory movements, employment is labelled as the primary arena for emancipation. At the same time, this moves motherhood in the direction of a so-called identity problem where state intervention is needed to solve the social and financial problems arising

from motherhood and not as an identity based on pride and dignity. Since the state lacks financial resources, however, welfare provisions are in danger, resulting in the need to redefine citizenship. Therefore, women are pushed into a precarious position: The definition of work as a full-time, long-term employment with social security benefits is becoming an exception rather than the norm. Employment as an arena of emancipation needs to be reconsidered, and it is not surprising that the number of women who consider family as the most lucrative and safest workplace has increased.

This contestation of neoliberal democracy can take several directions, and it offers space for a discussion on crucial issues of gender equality. The tendencies to redefine human rights and to hijack the existing gender equality machinery in support of ‘family’ are very much present on the level of the state apparatus in places like Hungary and Poland (with similar tendencies in many other places). The question is if these discussions about the future of human rights will build confidence to question these attempts while critically reflecting on the available language and rhetoric. As simple as it may sound, the process of listening and explaining as a tool of learning and fostering community acknowledges the individual as a valued member of a community of listeners, which is the first step towards re-enchantment.

The rhetoric of the victorious neoconservative politics after 1989 left emancipatory leftist politics in the defensive, because leftist discourse is marked by a defensive rhetoric – promoting the protection of women – and by a negative rhetoric – the fight against discrimination. The responses to the anti-gender movement by progressive actors are defensive, policy oriented and disenchanting (Kováts/Pető 2017: 117-133). In this respect, Lisa Brush (1996: 431) has called maternalism “feminism for hard times”. When the electoral support of traditional progressive parties is not widening while social, economic problems are increasing, a rethinking of maternalism might be the way out of the deadlock. ‘Cold Wars’ as the ones delineated here are tools and results of disenchantment, and we cannot really afford another disenchantment – because it will not end well.

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