Simulacrum of Progressive Politics

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SIMULACRUM OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

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The paper discusses the future of progressive politics, especially social democracy in Hungary. It argues, referring to the work by Tony Judt that the concept of "fear" is useful mobilizational force together with historical analogies based on analyzing the gendered history of the Hungarian progressive tradition.

Baudrillard's category of simulacrum was inspired by the paragraph story by Jorge Luis Borges, *On Exactitude in Science*.[2] In this short story Borges speaks about an empire which was so attached to the map of its own, when the empire collapsed nothing remained but the map, the simulation of the land which once was a powerful empire. After the collapse, the land was "inhabited by animals and beggars".[3] This paper is joining in the recent public debates about future of progressive politics in Europe. Following the 2008 triple crises (financial, migration and security) conferences and publications are trying to diagnose the causes of this recent dramatic decline in popularity of social democratic parties, previously the vanguards of progressive politics.

European social democracy is facing immense challenges after a long period of when "Social Europe" seemed to be consensual road for the future for even for conservative parties. Analysts are explaining the loss of popularity by different factors. Some are linking the crises either to the transformation of the capital into a new form of global free market capitalism or to the transformation of the state especially the welfare state provisions or to the transformation of the concept work itself. More paranoiac and elitist explanations are blaming the conservative and especially the emerging illiberal parties "stealing the cloth" of the social democrats by integrating their core values into their programs while at the same time depriving it from its political transformative potential. These changes in the

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[2]   A previous version of this paper was published as "Inhabited by Animals and Beggars"?, *Queries* 2 (2010), 110–117.

[3]   http://www.palacios-huerta.com/docs/Borges.pdf.

situation of social democracy are all connected to changes in social imaginary: the emerging cult of the individual is undermining the collective responsibility for social cohesion, communitarian units (*Gemeinschaft*) are replacing society (*Gesellschaft).* Social democrats in Europe tried to regulate global free market capitalism with social democratic values by a strong state such as solidarity with a mixed success. We cannot identify one or two factors which caused the declining popularity of today but rather the story of social democracy and progressive politics need to be retold and re-narrativised for a new start.

In this paper I would like to answer to the question how social democracy is shaping social imaginary in Hungary and I would like to do so with analyzing how gender differences are conceptualized in social imaginary. My starting point is Tony Judt, who in his analyses on future of social democracy pointed out that nobody ever forecasted the end of the roaming 1920s era, and it still ended among horrible circumstances.[4] Therefore he concludes, the only factor which can save social democracy in Europe, where by now the original social democratic values were mainstreamed largely without their home parties, is "a social democracy of fear". This fear for him means: "Rather than seeing to restore a language of optimistic progress we should begin by reacquainting ourselves with the recent past. The first task of radical dissenters today is to remind their audience of the achievements of the twentieth century, along with the likely consequences of our heedless rush to dismantle them".[5] So let me start this difficult endeavor to get to know more about our "recent past" with including another factor, namely gender into the analysis, trying to explain why social democracy is losing attraction as social imaginary today. I would like to expand the analyses of the "recent past" where Tony Judt stopped: to the post WWII period and I would like to focus on Hungary. I am claiming that the unresolved conflict of women's participation in social democratic movement is one of the reasons why social democracy is losing its popular support today. Is social democracy on its way to become a simulacrum in Hungary? Will social democratic imaginary disappear from Hungary? In the case of Baudrillard the empire vanished, and the simulacrum remained. In the case of Hungary, and the countries who felt at the wrong side of the Iron Curtain in 1945, the simulacrum is disappearing and the reality, namely the problems are remaining. And the responses to the structural crises (strong state, redistributive welfare policy, transforming unpaid care work to paid care work etc) are given by illiberal actors who consciously position themselves outside liberal value system.

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[4]   Tony Judt, What is Living and What is Dead in Social Democracy?, *The New York Review of Books* 56 (2009), No. 20.

[5]   Judt: *What is Living.*

Answering to this question about the creation of the simulacrum we must go further back in time following the suggestion by Tony Judt examining "our recent past". Social democracy as an ideology was conceived by the founding fathers (and not by mothers) as a response to the problems of men who were employed reregulating the relationship between the state, capital and citizens. Women's movement was founded as an appendix to the "main movement" extending the argumentation of class struggle to the oppression of women by men stating that without political, legal, educational emancipation the socialist program can not prevail. The Hungarian Social Democratic Party in principle demanded equally suffrage for both men and women. But the fight for women's rights was not on the priority list of the male party leaders. Moreover, the party leadership did not support the women's separate mobilization following Clara Zetkin, who supported women's right to vote but she denied that women's question as a separate issue exists. She claimed that women's issues such as maternal leave, breast feeding allowances should be demanded by the social democratic movement as a whole.[6] The publication of Hungarian social democratic journal: *Nőmunkás* (Female worker) was received with resentment by the male dominated trade union and party. The former was afraid of the cheaper female workforce snitching paid employment from men therefore started unionization of women, while the latter saw a threat in separate women's movement representing particularism against the unity of universalist movement. In *Nőmunkás*, László Rudas, (1885-1950) pointed out as far as the fight for suffrage is concerned "We, proletarian women (!) it should not be our aim (the gaining the suffrage A. P.) for us there is no women's movement, there is no separate movement, but one movement, the movement of the proletariats, the socialism".[7] Before WWI the short lived cooperation between the liberals and the social democratic women was considered as a "bourgeois" influence by the party leaders. The social democrats argued with equality while liberals (and conservatives) with difference: in this equality however gender differences were subordinated to the "main aims" of the movement. Women who became political agents in the 20th century with the introduction of general suffrage changed how politics was played forever as sexual difference was introduced into politics.[8] The question is how the introduction of difference changed the universalist social democratic party aims. I can bring up in lots of other examples from the interwar

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[6] Aranyossi, Magda, *Lázadó asszonyok. A magyar nőmunkásmozgalom története 1867–1919*, Budapest, Kossuth, 1963, 34.

[7] Rudas, László, Polgári és proletár nőmozgalom, *Nőmunkás* (1906. április 24.) Idézi Kovács, M. Mária, A magyar feminizmus korszakfordulója, *Café Bábel* 4 (1994), 180.

[8] Pető, Andrea – Szapor, Judit, Women and the Alternative Public Sphere: toward a Redefinition of Women's Activism and the Separate Spheres in East Central Europe, *NORA, Nordic Journal of Women's Studies* 12 (2004), 172–182.

period how the sexual "difference" was subordinated to the universalist party aims in the Hungarian social democratic party. Anna Kéthly, who was charismatic female leader of the social democracy much before the rise of successful female politicians from Scandinavia, editor of the *Nőmunkás*, nearly never stood up for "women's rights" publicly except the employment issues. At the same time the female politicians who were elected to the Budapest municipal on a social democratic ticket were ghettoized in the section on social policy which at the same time offered them a site for political training and building electoral support. This is exactly the strategy which is used by illiberal regimes.

After WWII half of Europe was occupied by the Red Army which had serious consequences for gender politics and for the mobilizational potential of the social democrats. After 1945 the sexual difference in the countries under Soviet occupation was framed in the equality discourse.[9] In that frame there were two alternatives: the social democratic and the communist handful of home grown and couple of hundreds returning from emigration from the Soviet Union. In 1945 the Social Democrat Party realized to their amazement that the communists, who in the interwar period were working under illegal conditions, had used their party to popularize themselves, now came out of hiding and demanded that they would be the single political representative of the working class.[10] The social democratic women's movement, apart from its well-built network and good working relations with the trade unions, also had conscious politicized women members. The Social Democrats after 1945 were proud that their female comrades "work with much greater agility than the average man".[11] The fact that it had state administration experience who worked in the Budapest municipal social policy section, actively took part in shaping social policy cannot be forgotten either. In the winter of 1945, the Social Democrat women's movement had the most radical program as far as gender equality is concerned; they were not bound by the tactical cautiousness that was so characteristic of the communists at that time. In their program the social democrats made a confident stand for the political and legal emancipation of women, equal pay for equal work, and furthermore, in accordance with broad social democratization, for the complete emancipation of women in the political and cultural spheres. For the social democrat women's movement two factors were to prove vital in their loss of social influence and to the failure of this promising political program. Their resistance was worn down by continual friction with the communists and they did not have material resources to distribute to the

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[9] Pető, Andrea, A Missing Piece? How Women in the Communist Nomeclature are not Remembering, *East European Politics and Society* 16 (2003), 948–958.

[10] More on this see Pető, Andrea, *Hungarian Women in Politics 1945-1951*, East European Monographs Series, New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 2003.

[11] Archive of Institute of Political History, Budapest (further PIL) 283. 20. 7. 268.

impoverished country and its voters. They also proved vulnerable when faced with new politicizing methods, like communist party members sabotaging the sound system of their public rallies, introduced by the communist. The traditional Social Democrat political culture based on the value of democracy, which the communists were so jealous of, was rather a disadvantage than otherwise when it came to the struggle for the mobilization of the workers, especially the young ones and the winning over of the peasants. On the 1st May celebration in 1945 the social democratic women were marching together with men wearing white blouse, dark skirts, and red tie, while the communist women were marching separately from men wearing red and white dotted headscarf. This difference in style and appearance was reflected in how sexual difference was handled by these parties. With the merge, which in practice was a takeover of the social democrats by the communist, the necessity of politics was victorious over the mission of progressive politics. György Marosán (1908-1992), the legendary social democratic leader turned to be loyal communist responsible at that time for the women's section in the party, who often solved conflicts that came up in women's meetings with consciously masculine gestures – by slapping the table, or shouting depending on the situation – recognized the essence of the matter: "Somewhere in the neighborhood a new type of person is forming, someone who runs factories, a politician, a statesman, a soldier: the socialist woman. What will men who are very left wing, at least verbally, do if ten years on from now a woman appears who does not wish to remain a servant?"[12] The end of the social democrat women's movement by merging with the communists in 1948 is perhaps one of the reasons that this question has still not been even asked why politically engaged women were subordinated to the class struggle.

The construction of dominant masculinity was never questioned, and the sexual binaries of man and woman remained fixed categories used in political mobilization and in identity politics. The simulacrum was constructed, and it was only a question of time when it will fall into pieces as the map of the empire in the story by Borges while the problems of gender inequality continued to exist.

During the "statist feminist" period the ideological anti-feminism of the communist emancipation policy was based on the concept of class struggle. As Miglena Nikolchina pointed out anti "statist emancipation" arguments felt into a rhetoric trap as far as gender equality is concerned because it defined the workplace as a site of equality.[13] In the private realm gender relations were continued to be dominated by traditional representations and expectations of femininity and

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[12] PIL 283/20/24. 102
[13] Pető, Andrea, Hungarian Women in Politics, in Joan Scott – Cora Kaplan – Debra Keats, (eds.), *Transitions, Environments, Translations: The Meanings of Feminism in Contemporary,* New York, NY, Routledge, 1997, 153–161.

masculinity.[14]Although the initial communist project was to change radically this realm and included hostile attitudes to sex as well as the idea of abolishing the family as the early days of the Bolsheviks did. This radicalism was quickly relinquished, and the small bourgeoisie values were adapted by the communist party and the simulacrum was covering the movement. On the level of official party ideology: it was assumed that gender equity has been achieved and women's problems have been resolved with the help of a well-developed state subsidized child-care system, paid pregnancy leaves, up to three years infant care, etc. And the official ideology had its theory of gender ("in so far as women are like men, they are equal"), the private sphere had its verbalized dichotomous gendered norms ("boys do not cry"). The place where real but unarticulated redefinitions of gender happened was the workplace which functioned as a nexus of the official and the private. The emancipated attitudes of women during communism became a matter of habitual practice learned during paid employment but remained largely without a language which might have shaped political mobilisation by gender.

The result is a lasting transformation of the "praxis" of femininity which will play an important role in 1989. If working women did not get very high in the professional and political hierarchies, they tended to perceive this as their own choice. This rhetorical strategy as a heritage of the statist feminist period is acting against addressing structural discrimination even today. From that point of view, women seem to blend easily in their environment so more difficult to address them and this partly explains the decrease of women's membership and active participation in politics in general and in the social democratic movement in particular. In Hungary in the transition process of 1989 the historical social democratic party was also re-founded together with the other "historical" parties. As a rule, the more the party was historical the fewer women were in there in (the historical Round Table debate which redefined Hungarian citizenship after the collapse of communism) and the less sensitive the party was to the issue of difference.

At the end of the Cold War brought the victorious neo-liberalization of Eastern Europe which also opened up space for the deep conservatism of the Hungarian society which survived the 50 years of statist feminism unchanged. In 1989 it was the former communist party which got into the market of political thoughts with a group of well-trained female politicians however their presence did not change the dominant masculine identity politics of the party. As the time passed the successor party of the communist party, the MSZP (Magyar Szocialista Párt-Hungarian

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[14] For more on how gender operated during statist socialism see Miglena Nikolchina, The Seminar: Mode d'emploi Impure Spaces in the Light of Late Totalitarianism, *Differences – a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13 (2002), 96–127.

Socialist Party) failed to attract young female members because the difference discourse cannot be successful mobilization frame in a universalist frame especially when other alternatives emerged. The revival of the conservative and extreme right wing mobilised women in the framework of politics of motherhood.[15] In that framework the politics of motherhood women could find structural support for securing the family and a rhetoric which offers symbolic recognition of unpaid care work with the concept of women's dignity. The rhetorical frame of maternalism by the victorious conservatism is not questioned neither by the neoliberal "new feminism" of the young generation who believe that they alone are the source of their own success and they refuse to pay for the failures of others or acknowledge that these are structures factors causing discrimination nor by the ideologically uncertain MSZP which in principle staged itself as the successor of the social democratic values. The categorization for "men" and "women" as political agents worked in the early 1900, but it remained unresponsive to the political and intellectual shift towards developments of identity politics from the 1960s. The simulacrum of social democracy attracts the elderly voters with nostalgia, but it does not work for the younger voters who are moving towards other alternatives. As a consequence, in the social democratic movement women necessarily are ghettoized into the women's section where they are also fighting for the same agenda of women's difference but in a framework which does not offer them visibility publicly or the acknowledgement of gender difference. The members, middle aged and older, white women are as unfit for coalitional politics as were their fore-mother, the social democratic women in between 1945 and 1948 without the threat of dissolving themselves in the political agenda defined by others. And today these "others" are numerous. Therefore, coming up with a feasible strategy for the future is not easy. The social democrats are advocating socialist internationalism in an era where the alternatives are polarized around the axis of cosmopolitanism. They are advocating "women's politics" when the identity politics of the 1980s is already a part of history textbooks and without coalitional politics the chances of success is limited.

In Europe women's demands has changed during the past century: emphasis moved from needs to rights, not independently from the success of the social democratic movements earlier and within this, from the restricted right to parity in selected areas to the larger right of self-determination. This crucial shift was

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[15] Pető, Andrea, Die Marien in der Sonne (Die Apokalyptischen Madonnen), in Johanna Laakso (ed./Hg.), *Frau & Nation / Woman & Nation,* Finno-Ugrian Studies in Austria 5, Wien, LIT-Verlag, 2008, 137–174. and Pető, Andrea, Anti-Modernist Political Thoughts on Motherhood in Europe in a Historical Perspective, in Heike Kahlert – Ernst Waltraud (eds.), *Reframing Demographic Change in Europe. Perspectives on Gender and Welfare State Transformations* (Focus Gender), Band 11. Berlin, Lit Verlag, 2010, 189–201.

not made in Hungary, the "patriarchal bargain" the loyalty to men as a key to self fulfilment was replaced by "party bargain": the loyalty to the MSZP which the women were unable neither to modernize nor to transform. As it is often the case with simulacrums.

Returning the issue of simulacrum which frames my contribution to this volume honoring Professor Károly Bárd, we cannot expect a popular impact of social democracy in the future if the internationalism and universalism, the two key corner stones of social democratic movement will not be reconceptualised This new start should lead to the formation of a new language and a new self-definition. I would not go as far as Tony Judt claiming that "social democracy" as a term has not relevance (everybody is a democrat nowadays and social is a too wide concept to attract anybody). Therefore, what remained for him is the "fear" from worst to come as a mobilization force. In that case we can only hope that parties claiming social democracy as a heritage will learn from the past mistakes and reconsider its position to difference. Otherwise social democracy together with progressive politics really becomes a vanishing simulacrum in a land "inhabited by animals and beggars".

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