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STIGMATIZATION OF FEMINISM

Gender Studies as “Gender Ideology” in right-wing populist political discourse in Hungary

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In my reading, the most salient characteristic feature of contemporary right-wing populist political discourse in Hungary is the fact that hate speech has become the daily routine of communication. It is a grave situation in which hate speech passes by unnoticed, mobilizing a series of dangerous assumptions as a mundane habit of thought about “us” against and over a range of diverse political demands under the banner of “them”. What used to function as explicit “hot statements” stigmatizing particular values has become a “banal” series of diverse, contradictory statements in Michael Billig’s sense of the distinction.¹ Although Billig discusses the particular ideology of nationalism, his objective is to expose that hot statements of nationalistic hate are made possible because they are embedded in the network of banal statements that are therefore not benign but constitutive of the harm carried out by the hot statements; I believe this objective can be useful for studying other ideologies at work. I think the ultimate point of banalization is reached at the moment when the normalization of hate speech unites a number of disparate political agendas, serving a particular regime’s interest in positioning themselves as the powerful bearer of anything in opposition to whatever comes to be associated with “the enemy”. In contemporary Hungary, the boundary of hot/banal statements has been reconfigured in the government’s political rhetoric to the point where hate speech is taken for granted and considered desirable by the majority of the citizenry. The process started in 2010, the year that marks the beginning of the third term of the Orbán regime today.²

The stigmatization of “gender” as “ideology” has become a key element of this political rhetoric of hate. The concept functions as an empty signifier in Ernesto Laclau’s sense of the term,³ as if it were a self-evident center rendering a series of diverse but familiar statements of linguistically mediated injury of hate speech, in the service of manufacturing of what Ruth Wodak calls the politics of fear.⁴ Furthermore, “gender” is not the only effective empty signifier triggering fear but works in a complex relationship with several others, namely the tropes of “Soros”, “Brussels” and the “migrant”. The success of the ideological work of stigmatization of “gender” hinges on its capacity to evoke these various other tropes, rendered in a chain of equivalence. They may emerge as constitutive elements of the meaning of “gender”, effectively legitimizing the forceful rhetoric of hate as the inevitable response to the “fear” in opposition to “gender ideology”. The right-wing populist discourse works then in an uneven discursive field of hate with several effective junctures of empty signifiers at play, reinforcing the binary of “us” and “them” from multiple perspectives to the point of unbridgeable rupture. The most harmful effect of this politics of fear in my view is the fetishization of “hate” itself: the naturalization of the assumption that the only legitimate and reasonable routine response to difference is “fear” that should inevitably require one to “courageously wage a war” rhetorically in the form of hate speech against the “intruder”. It is the formulation and routine inscription of this logic that has made hate speech “banal”.

The discourse of “gender ideology” (sometimes “gender craze” or “genderism”) over the preceding eight years of the

abstract

In my paper I look at the discourse strategies of the current official Hungarian political discourse in which the rights of women, sexual minorities and people with non-conforming gender identities as well as feminist academics are sacrificed in the wake of a right-wing populism where hate speech has become the daily routine of communication. The stigmatization of “gender” as ideology has become a central element of political discourse in Hungary since 2010 — resulting in the ban of the MA in Gender Studies in the Official Gazette on October 12, 2018. For a critical reading, I situate the strategic attack in relation to three junctures of meaning-making of “feminism” and “gender” since the system change in 1989 that have eventually crystalized into the commonsense discourses of “gender ideology” and “gender-craze” of right-wing populism. I develop a social semiotic model of situated polyvocal meaning that goes beyond the post-structuralist understanding that all meanings should be ideological — a position that is counter-effective for feminist knowledge and movement alike as the current crisis over the status of gender studies shows. I argue that without a positioned epistemology there is no ground left for reclaiming “gender” as the key critical category of analysis for exposing unequal relations of power.

KEY WORDS: Gender studies, feminism, populism.

regime culminated in the government’s ban of the MA degree in Gender Studies on October 12, 2018.⁵ The official announcement consisted of a single statement of a decree published in the *Hungarian Official Gazette*. What is more, even the legal document avoided naming the particular degree: “13. Line 115 in Appendix 3, 139/2015. (09. VI.) Government Decree is to cease to have effect.”⁶⁷ Against the systemic stigmatization of the concept of gender in the political discourse, the announcement may read as the “hot” statement of stigmatization but, paradoxically, mitigated by the act of silencing the very name of the program. A cryptic reference suffices, coopting everyone concerned in higher education and academia to know that the empty line in the list used to be occupied by the MA in Gender Studies.

In order to situate the contemporary discursive formation of the meaning of “gender” as ideology and its complex relationship with the other three prominent empty signifiers, “Soros”, “Brussels” and “migrant”, I first briefly outline the historical legacy of the Orbán regime’s politics of fear and introduce the logic of the three major junctures in the political media discourse that emerged in the wake of the system change in the 1990s, trying to ward off feminism. In the second section of the analysis I show how these discourses reemerge in the 2010s and come to be mobilized in the Orbán regime’s populist discourse after some ten years of silence at the beginning of the 21st century. In the third and final part of the analysis, I address the feminist discourses in circulation in the media in both decades and explore whether and to what extent their position on “gender” could resist discreditation. I include this self-reflexivity to see if its logic could open up for mobilization and draw on the power of the immediate and huge international protest against the Government’s ban.⁸ This is an important question for the future of gender studies in Hungary.

Meaning and ideology

Before studying the actual discourses, I need to develop my position on the relationship between meaning and ideology; this epistemological work needs to be done to counter the populist discourse that tries to discredit the analytical category of feminist critique as the (necessary) expression of an aggressive ideology. To my knowledge, this important epistemological question has not yet been addressed in the various critical works on anti-genderism.⁹

This epistemological work entails going beyond the logic of the binary that either all meanings are inevitably ideological or scientific truth should necessarily escape the bias of ideology, as both positions would inevitably make us go on the defensive at best, reiterating the entitlement of the more powerfully positioned to define the meaning of “ideology”. The post-structuralist approach rests on the assumption that all meanings are arbitrary cultural constructs and as such always already ideological, including any possible meanings of “gender” – our feminist definitions just as much as those of our hostile political opponents. The structuralist approach, on the other hand, proposes that ideology is a matter of false consciousness pertaining to the superstructure. It holds out the promise of owning “the” truth in the final instance in the allegedly objective non-biased field of science that is to describe its object of study true to the facts, including feminist scholarship. Instead of this binary I propose a discursive approach to conceptualizing the relationship between meaning and ideology. The category of gender would be neither an infinite number of arbitrary textual constructions everywhere and anywhere, nor would it be always in one and the same place, anchored in the foundational logic of a self-evidently understood sexual(ized) visibility of bodily morphology. “Gender” needs to be positioned somewhere particular to be open to change and political accountability according to historically contingent relations of power.

As a scholar who makes critical studies of discourse, I understand the concept “gender” as a dialectic relationship of the socially regulated material practices of gendering and its institutionalized symbolic practices of representation. The concept emerges and registers as meaningful with a given speech community as part of the socially regulated practices of distinction from within multiple particular institutions of habitual activities – of which we cannot designate the field of economic production as purely “material” and necessarily the most important “origin” of the ideologically inflected superstructure completely outside of the symbolic practice of signifying. The material practices one is directly engaged in always entail the act of encoding, or the act of recalling other practices one reflects on from within a given perspective. In short, the historically contingent material practices of gendering always entail

a practice of categorization which is shaped by the material practices to be made sense of and, conversely, our understanding of the activities will shape the trajectory of those practices. The categories therefore come to be enmeshed within particular orders of value and are indexical of the institutions within which they emerge as concepts of particular meaning/with particular intelligibility.¹⁰

Drawing on Denise Thompson’s argument,¹¹ I contend that once we stop collapsing power and domination on the one hand and stop setting up (scientific) truth as the opposite of ideology on the other, we can argue for the emergence of a historically situated contingent (but not purely arbitrary) meaning that allows for the formation of meaning that turns out to be positioned in symmetrical relations to power, beyond the ruling relations of dominance. In Thompson’s words:

It is not the case that we are always in ideology. What we are always “in” are systems of meaning. Whether meanings are ideological or not depends on whether or not they are used in the service of domination. [...] For the purposes of feminist politics, whether any particular ideological pronouncement is true or false is not the main issue. What a feminist politics needs to decide is whether the meanings which structure [i.e. organize] people’s lives reinforce relations of ruling by reinforcing the interests of the dominators and suppressing the interests of the subordinated [...]¹²

The argument above explicitly states that meaning is ideological as long as it is the effect of relations of domination and as such reiterates those hierarchical configurations as “inevitable”, “natural” or even “desirable”. Meanings can be reconfigured within terms of equal standing and be used to deconstruct and expose ideologies. We can argue therefore that feminist reconfigurations of “gender” can be defended as non-ideological in so far as they enable (the imagination of) producing equal gender relations of power.

Meaning is inevitably implicated in social struggles and as such is never neutral but charged with values. Language (signification) enters into politics as a medium (representation) as well as a focus or site for conflict about “legitimate” meaning in its own right. Any change to meaning therefore can be potentially transformative if and when articulated from within a position that is temporarily structured by equal relations of power that at the same time allow for a configuration of meaning that undermines relations of domination. These transformative meanings of gender then are not made once and for all but are in need of reiteration as long as heteropatriarchy lasts.

Reading Thompson’s distinction between living in meaning

“THE DISCOURSE OF ‘GENDER IDEOLOGY’ [...] OVER THE PRECEDING EIGHT YEARS OF THE REGIME CULMINATED IN THE GOVERNMENT’S BAN OF THE MA DEGREE IN GENDER STUDIES ON OCTOBER 12, 2018.”

versus living in ideology in relation to the dialectical conceptualization of discourse in critical discourse analysis provides me with the methodology that enables an ideology critique of the meanings that hegemonic power relations of social existence re/produce and keep in place, representing those relations of domination as inevitable.¹³ The very conditions of the effective existence of the current right-wing populist political regime of domination hinges on “banalizing” its strategies of making meaning, including the acts of stigmatizing the concepts, including gender, singled out for functioning as “empty signifiers”. According to critical discourse analysis, discourse is conceptualized as the intertwined relationship, or the nexus of partially internalized symbolic practices (text) and material practices (context) that emerges around a juncture articulated out of multiple distinctions as an effect of historically specific relations of power. The intelligibility of any category then is organized by multiplicity. In so far as making sense of the actual practice we are engaged in doing implicates articulating reflections on multiple other practices at different locations, moments, and systems of value, the regulated practice of signifying “here and now” is inherently plural and the emerging category of classification in the process is necessarily organized by plurality. Categories are articulated into a relatively coherent pattern from a dominant perspective at the intersection of various other vectors of social relations of power mobilizing their own constituent elements of the “concept”. Conversely, these elements are potentially articulated into other categories. Any given category may therefore evoke multiple other categories through the partial inclusion of historically contingent constituent elements – keeping the concept open to (critical) reconfiguration. That is, categorization may play an ideological role in multiple ways through various chains of equivalence in endorsing a given pattern over other patterns of meaning as long as it is recognized to be sufficiently in sync with what is perceived as “obviously” intelligible in a given social space without any further reflection.¹⁴

The misogynistic renaming and inversion of “gender” as “ideology” hinges precisely on the familiarity of the disparaging meaning across multiple discursive fields to the point of escaping critical reflection and working as “common sense” and unquestionable, obvious “truth”, a category that makes “false” claims to scholarly value. Over the past eight years in Hungary this is exactly what has happened to the meaning of “gender”. It has been redefined as a “hideous ideology” and as such a legitimate and inevitable target of (hate) attacks and discreditation manipulated from within the various institutions of state power and social actors in the highest positions of decision making. This centralized redefinition “in protection” of the citizenry is particularly ironic in a country where

citizens” lived experience in the past eight years is a pervasive interference of state politics and ideology in all spheres of our life.

Discursive legacy of discreditation from the 1990s

The contemporary populist discourse of anti-genderism in Hungary has its own historic legacy. It draws on the hostile discourses on feminism that emerged in the wake of the system change in 1989. The category at stake back then, though, was not “gender” but the name of the field itself that has developed it, i.e. “feminism”. The most influential institution in the 1990s for shaping the meaning and public disposition to “feminism” was

not the institutions of state power but (mostly the right-wing) print media functioning as a gate-keeping mechanism.¹⁵ In addition, the discreditation in the 1990s media was a small-scale strategy at that stage. There were only 52 mentions of “feminism” in the entire database of the so-called *Pressdoc* CD-ROM of the first decade of the system change, including altogether only four of them voiced by feminist academics and/or activists. *Pressdoc* was produced

on a weekly basis by the Parliament Library in the 1990s for MPs interested in the contents of the political print media.¹⁶ The 48 mentions were rendered into three conspicuous junctures of meaning making, all three producing a discrediting and scary meaning of feminism. The three discourses of gate-keeping in the 1990s shared the epistemological stance that reduces feminism to its actual actors, collapsing a social practice into its actual practitioners, the “feminists”. This conflation in itself indexes the assumption that “feminism” is not really powerful. It is not represented as a movement or significant scholarship but only the harmful activities and ideas of “a few feminists”. Insignificant in number, they can be safely imagined to be precluded from the institutions of the new “democratic system” – yet important enough to “recognize” and keep an eye on them. The actual reader is invited to fear them, thereby precluding “in time” the formation of any alliance and sympathy with them. The three discourses will be reconfigured in the commonsense discourses of “gender ideology” and “gender-craze” in the 2010s.

Each of the three discourses of stigmatization in the 1990s has a figure at their center, making up a constituent element of the trope of the “lesbian terrorist”. The first is an anti-American discourse of nationalism that articulates feminism as an “alien import”. This explicit location and reduction of global feminist history to the US social and cultural space – erasing its Hungarian history at the same time – works to implicate feminism as “non-Hungarian” “alien” propaganda that threatens to undermine the newly won autonomy of the “nation”. It is imagined to be working against the newly re-gained “real” interests of “our” women, should they go along with their “infatuated” American sisters.

“A DISCOURSE OF ANTI-GENDER OR GENDERISM HAS EMERGED IN THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE SINCE 2010, THE BEGINNING OF THE ORBÁN REGIME IN POWER TO DATE.”

American women are said to have gone “too far”, now allegedly abusing their power when taking wealthy and powerful (celebrity) men to court. They are reported to be suing those men for sexual harassment with no cause. They are simply motivated either by their insatiable greed or – even better for the purpose of stigmatization – by their devious hatred of men, a disposition that is argued to be ultimately “responsible” for those men’s violence against the women (sic). As an inevitable result, this feminist figure is expected to be the object of contempt and disidentification by any “reasonable” women in the readership.

The second intertwined discourse of anti-communism contributes to the meaning of fear by the contention that the few but “infatuated” feminist women in Hungary did not learn from our past experience of communism. They do not understand that the “woman question” on the communist party’s agenda belongs to the failures of the communist past. In state socialism, goes the argument, in the name of full employment of women, the communist ideology deprived women of their “real career”, i.e. enjoying giving birth to children and taking care of the home (sic). Following this logic, the woman reader should know better and act as the “new woman” of the system change who obviously wants nothing but to leave that past and the workplace behind, and “choose” to return happily to the home – the place that the “careerist feminist” would refuse in the name of “self-fulfillment”.

Finally, the feminist figure is re/presented as a failure on its own terms in that she allegedly refuses to acknowledge the importance of women’s ways of knowing. She is said to disregard the disposition of the “majority” of women who are now apparently satisfied with their life re-centered in the home – as a happy result of the regime change. By implication, this rhetoric entails yet again the assumption that the feminist figure is unintelligent or simply too stupid to recognize her situation. Her ignorant determination to recruit other women into their “militant army” is that of brute aggressive force. As such, it requires some equal measures for elimination in the name of “protection” performed by the political media if “properly” responsible.

At the intersection of the three discourses then, we have the ideologically double-blind “lesbian terrorist” who is intoxicated by the new (American) and old (communist) ideologies which have made her lose her sense of reason, trying to force other women to join the militant ranks of her ilk. But the reasonable reader does not need to worry any more, now that she has been warned against these “amazons” and invited to act against them. In short, the dominance of the heteropatriarchal institution of the media is effectively maintained by this gatekeeping at the expense of its real challenge by feminism – scapegoating feminists as “lesbian terrorists”. It is only legitimate and morally right to act against them and what they come to be associated with, at the historic moment of regaining and rebuilding the “nation” in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Recontextualization from within a populist politics of fear

After some ten years of silence following the first decade of the system change in the 1990s, a discourse of anti-gender or gender-

ism has emerged in the political discourse since 2010, the beginning of the Orbán regime in power to date. The emergence of this hostile politics is not unique to Hungary. It has been gaining a lead and strengthened its position on the political horizon of right-wing populism in Europe in response to the global crisis of neo-liberal capitalism since the 2008 crisis.¹⁷ Right-wing populist parties, in fact, have been successfully established and present on a global scale since the 1990s, challenging what they call “multiculturalism”,¹⁸ but until the 2008 crisis they were believed to be a marginal political force – a belief that has proven wrong as the global and increasingly violent discourses of anti-gender may prove. The Hungarian situation in this regard can be seen exceptional in that the discourse has figured in official government propaganda. In the first four years of their government, 2010–2014, the anti-gender stance was predominantly defined in parliamentary debates, and was then taken over by political figures of the highest rank: ministers, state secretaries, and the prime minister and the speaker of the house. Ironically, the inability of political institutions to deliver and maintain the sense of security and prosperity is to emerge as an appeal to the “people” at the moment when the privilege that the dominant classes enjoy, and their sense of confidence about the entitlements associated with their social location, is under threat. The politics of fear has conveniently pushed the important matters of economic, cultural or political conflicts of “nation building” in the background, while promising to deliver some “good life” to any and all groups of precarity at the expense of those who are singled out as enemies and their collaborators.

The production of this “us, the Hungarian people” reached its peak in the Prime Minister’s speech on March 15, 2018 only three weeks before the general elections. It was delivered on the occasion of the national holiday celebrating the outbreak of the 1848 war of independence from Habsburg rule:

After the elections we shall, naturally, get even, politically, morally, and legally; but now we cannot waste our energy and time on this. Let’s throw off the attacks like water off a duck’s back [...] all we should invest our force in is defending Hungary.¹⁹

One could argue that since winning the April 2018 election, it is precisely this fortified showdown that the prime minister has explicitly called a “culture war” that has been going on, including the ban on the MA in Gender Studies. As the quote from the prime minister’s speech shows, the politics of fear has redefined all political, cultural and economic opponents in the country as “enemies threatening the Hungarian nation” and as such the legitimate targets of the anti-intellectualism element of hate speech rhetoric serving to justify all kinds of legislative moves in the field of education and research, such as what is called the Lex CEU (see below), the restructuring and nationalization of Corvinus University of Economics from a state to a private institution, and the most recent example of aggressive state control over the research institutes of the Academy of Sciences.

Linguistically speaking, the most telling characteristic feature

of right-wing populist discourses is the production of social relations set up between “us” and “them” as two empty signifiers as if in an irreconcilable radical conflict with each other through the routine use of diverse forms of hate speech.²⁰ On the one hand, that logic produces a homogenized “us” around which diverse social groups that live in fear of precarity, losing their autonomy, their trust in the possibility of transparent political institutions, can conveniently be called upon to come together and re/imagine themselves as “strong defenders” of the “cultural values” of the “nation” in the face of any event, institution, collective, or individual declared to be “a hostile malicious threat”, trying to invade “us” with “their alien ideologies”. The cultural threat to the “nation” in the eight years – which from the perspective of the strategic demonization of “gender” results in the ban of the MA in Gender Studies – is predominantly encoded as a fundamentalist Christian discourse, inviting “us” to defend “our” so-called traditional family values, mobilized also against the perceived threat of the “Muslim immigrant” that “Brussels” is trying (in vain) to impose upon “us”. The constituent element of fear is a xenophobic, Islamophobic discourse that can be set up as “Brussels” transnational conspiracy” betraying “our Christian values” that should be seen as the “foundation of Europe” as well as sacrificing “our women” to the imaginary sexual violence of “their men”: The mobilization of the fundamentalist discourse of Christianity may then be associated with an anti-Semitic discourse when “Brussels” and the various civil organizations, NGOs supporting the refugees over the 2015 crisis, are encoded as part of a “Soros conspiracy”, drawing on the figure of György Soros and his Open Society Fund that is argued to be promoting cultural and political values that are merely a matter of concern for the “liberal cosmopolitan intellectuals”, evoking not only the discourse of anti-intellectualism but that of anti-Semitism as well. How does the legacy of discrediting feminism in the 1990s work in the Orbán regime’s rhetoric of fear? In my reading, the concept of gender comes to be rearticulated as an empty signifier with the help of all three discourses from the 1990s.

Firstly, gender as the legacy of the communist past in the 1990s comes to be reconfigured through the anti-intellectualism discourse of the 2010s when it is now denied the status of a scientific category, implying that gender studies are guilty of usurping the status of science, deceiving their students, the parents, and the broader society of “us”. The Prime Minister’s chief of staff, shortly after the Government’s plan to revoke the MA in Gender Studies was reported in the media, said at a press conference in August 2018: “The Hungarian government is of the clear view that people are born either men or women. They lead their lives the way they think best, but beyond this, the Hungarian state

does not wish to spend public funds on education in this area.”²¹ In short, the discipline was denied academic merit and relegated to the domain of ideology, encoding its practice as a matter of mere political propaganda.

The chief of staff’s conclusion that it should be legitimate and reasonable for the government – for any responsible government, for that matter – to stop funding a degree that hides its “real face” as a vicious ideology implicates another element of the meaning of the term. In so far as “gender studies” is argued to have no foundation in the materiality of biology, gender is assumed to be a set of meaningless words and so the discipline comes to be implicated as inessential, an ideological fabrication in comparison with the “productivity of real science”. The

“FEMINISM IS ABOUT CHANGING THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE OR PARTNERSHIP ALTOGETHER AND WITH IT THE BIOLOGIST PERCEPTION OF THE MALE/FEMALE BINARIES OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE.”

conclusion resonates with an important constitutive element of the regime’s populist discourse, namely the argument questioning the value of anything intellectual if and whenever it is seen fit to be declared “non-productive” of knowledge that could transform “the materiality of reality” to “our advantage”. Along that trajectory of “non-productivity” we can easily situate calling gender an ideology within the much broader “cultural war” going on in the country against the social sciences and humanities evoking the discourse of

intellectualism – pushing the very productive potential of social criticism into oblivion as an act of political denial.

Secondly, the 1990s discourse of calling feminism an “alien ideology” is also reconfigured in the gender-ideology discourse of the 2010s in two intertwined ways. On the one hand, the “alien”, American character of “gender” now comes to be explicitly encoded as “anti-Semitism”. Since the national blueprint for registering an MA in Gender Studies accredited in 2004 was submitted by the US chartered private university, Central European University in Budapest, it could easily be represented an American “import” in the context of the debates around and protests against the fast-tracked law of April 2017 that requires “foreign universities” to continue teaching activities in their country of origin. In the case of CEU, having been active since its foundation in 1991, this meant imposing legislation retroactively and the threat of discontinuing its degrees that are accredited in the US only.²² Consequently, the fate of the concept and the degree is linked to its institutional “alien” origin as a New York State chartered university. However, the university’s private status has become much more prominent in the past two years, centralizing the figure of its funder, György Soros, who is of Hungarian Jewish descent. In the various government administrators’ speeches and statements, CEU has been constantly referred to as the “Soros University”.

The potential meaning of the name and the image of the per-

son as “the frightful, ghastly, monstrous Jew” was already present everywhere in the Government sponsored huge billboards all over the country as part of their ongoing waves of anti-refugee campaigns since the summer of 2015.²³ It is through the mediation of the anti-Semitic representation of the photos of the university’s founder that gender comes to be associated with the second meaning of the “alien ideology”, the “migrant” who is encoded to be “alien” in terms of his religion, who, just like “gender”, is threatening the “Christian values” of the nation by the allegedly “increased amount of sexual violence committed by (male) migrants.” For a telling example of this logic, let me quote the government’s spokesperson explaining their refusal to participate in a parliamentary debate on why the government refuses to ratify the Istanbul Convention:

The biggest threat for women at the moment is migration and migrants in Europe. Wherever they have appeared the figure of violence against women and children has dramatically jumped. Those who are now talking about their concern for women in a round-table discussion have hindered the modification of the constitution to forbid the settlement of migrants.²⁴

Regarding the third discourse in the 1990s, i.e. the backlash against the feminist claim of the importance of women’s ways of knowing, it is rearticulated in the right-wing populist discourse today when gender is stigmatized as the “secret” propaganda of the “gay lobby”, the reincarnation of the “terrorist lesbian” trope. Over the years they are assumed to have grown into a powerful lobby, aiming to undermine the “traditional Christian (heterosexual) family”. According to that logic, the definition of gender as a social construct in effect denies the male/female binary of some divine creation and results in the dangerous blurring of “children’s healthy sense” of identity. This stigmatization of gender and the discipline that is supposed to be responsible for promoting the demise of the “traditional family” is not unique to Hungary. Calling the concept of gender into question has been part of a larger global discourse since the 1990s and goes back to the United Nation’s Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Judith Butler, exploring the historical trajectory of the meaning of sexual difference, singles out the moment when the Vatican warns against gender and tries to dislodge the concept “from its foundational place”²⁵ and encode it as the ideological weapon of non-heterosexuals. It is still surprising to see this fundamentalist discourse being validated by the secular power of the state at the historic moment when the Vatican has been trying – in varying degrees – to revisit its hardline stance on gay sexuality and gender identity since the election of Pope Francis in 2013.²⁶

Feminist voices of self-definition

The political discursive field in Hungary is not as homogeneous as has been implicated by the discussion so far. Feminist voices, even if marginalized by the media, were already challenging the regime’s rhetoric of discreditation in the 1990s.

The little space given to feminist self-definitions – the four mentions of feminism by feminists in the *Pressdoc* CD-ROM – took place in interviews with prominent scholars who were also known for their activism in the 1990s. However, in the political dailies it was predominantly the voice of a reformist feminism speaking: Reformist in the sense that it did not question the heterosexist myth of men and women as equal partners in a presumably complementary relationship. To that extent, this perspective shared the misogynist male position of the dominant gate-keeping rhetoric and reinforces the ideology of “complementarity of the two sexes”:

Academic: [...] Of course, it is not that feminists would reject the major elements of the bourgeois family values or would be anti-sex or anti-men. But we should dust off the ancient perception of woman in order to see what we, women, want [...] So that we can choose from various options in accordance with our real needs.

Journalist: Where are men in all this process?

Academic: Naturally, without men, feminists would be left all by themselves in it. It would be good to see that men take democracy seriously as well, beyond party politics, and start practicing it right in the home. [...] A woman who is more balanced, and has more time for her appearance and children, could be a nicer partner for men as well, which can, in turn, enhance men’s well-being too. We should also take our own first steps in this direction right now! (emphasis in italic added)²⁷

The reformist feminist discourse in the 1990s enters into a:

hegemonic allegiance [with the dominant misogynistic discourse on “feminism”] in defense of the heterogendered social order, even if for different reasons. [...] Insofar as (discursive) practices [are] ideological in that they aim at maintaining the status quo by naturalizing the given hegemonic relations of patriarchal power, [...] the various types of discourses enacted in the definition of “feminism” reinforce the patriarchal regulation of women’s labor and desire precisely by taking gender as sexually pre-given.²⁸

As I argued in my 2005 contribution quoted above, my premise is that feminism is *not* about giving housewives their due as “partners” who may therefore have energy and time left to be pleasurable to live with. Feminism is about changing the social conditions of the institution of marriage or partnership altogether and with it the biologist perception of the male/female binaries of sexual difference. A feminist critique of the Government’s current meaning-making practices of discrediting and stigmatizing “gender” as a category of hideous ideology cannot return to validating the (little) reformist self-definition of feminism back in the 1990s. In Rosemary Hennessy’s formulation:

Positing male and female as distinct and opposite sexes that are naturally attracted to one another is integral to patriarchy. Woman's position as subordinate other, as (sexual) property, and as exploited laborer depends on [this] heterosexual matrix in which woman is taken to be man's [natural complementary] opposite.²⁹

That is, instead of naturalizing further the biologist concept of sexual desire, what should have been addressed in the 1990s is the hegemonic power relations of gender between "woman" and "man" that organize sexual difference ideologically in order to naturalize the heteropatriarchal "partnership" that then re-emerges in full force as the ahistorical fundamentalist "Christian family" model in the right-wing populist discourse of the 2010s. This is not wishful thinking projected back into the past, though. In addition to the little reformist voice in the *Pressdoc* CD-ROM, there was one resisting voice, even if in a single issue of a newly founded alternative weekly magazine, challenging precisely that imposition of normative sexuality through the power of irony:

But feminists are also said to be lesbians. And if they protest, their opponents only become all the more satisfied because they have managed to change the topic, to shift the direction of feminist criticism, or perhaps because they have succeeded in frightening other women into thinking the same. So the only good strategy is if a feminist answers: "Sure, I am a lesbian. So what?"³⁰

What has been at stake over the past thirty years, in my reading, is forging a position that makes feminism and its key analytical category of gender meaningful beyond securing a heterosexual social order by harnessing desire and labor in the interest of the expansion of (cultural) capital and the accumulation of profits (including our own academic promotion or access to research funds). In short, we must be determined to de-center the concept of gender as grounded in biology and with it we can develop a different logic that is not inflected with our own ideology of heteronormativity and can undermine the charge of "ideology".³¹

How far do the contemporary feminist discourses participate in the reification of this hetero-gendered sexual identity today? Have they been rearticulated beyond the binary distinction of gender?

I think the past decade can be characterized by the emergence of a new radical left discourse of gender that evolved and was shaped in the debates on "sex work or prostitution" and "transgender or feminism" in the name of a new Marxist feminist critique, trying to redefine "gender" in the face of the hostile discrimination of the category. The representatives of this radical left, who are between their mid-twenties and thirties, based

in Budapest, doing a PhD (not necessarily in gender studies) and/or participating in activism organized by women NGOs, mostly draw on Nancy Fraser's works. With reference to Fraser, they argue for the priority of a critique of redistribution, as that should result in structural, i.e. "real" change of global neoliberalism, against and over the arguably inessential cultural claims to recognition of identity associated with queer theory and trans activism.³² The latter is seen from within this logic as a "dangerous foreign, mostly Anglo-American-based" import that cannot explain the social reality of Hungarian women, whose main problem is economic survival.

In feminist and LGBTQ activism the term [gender] is used in two senses. In the former it is used an *analytical category*, i.e. *social gender* in connection with biological gender (i.e. sex), that may grasp the historical specificities of what counts as feminine and masculine, what options are available for men and women in a given society. In the other [LGBTQ activist] usage, social gender is expanded with, or more exactly substituted for, *another meaning*, especially in the *Anglo-American feminist and LGBTQ activism*: there is a growing number of people who identify it with "gender identity", that is whether one identifies with their biological sex, for instance if in a female body

one identifies as a woman or as a man or non-binary. They understand gender as some internal essential or chosen identity (non-locatable within a male-female binary.) The left/feminist critiques of the latter position also call this understanding a gender-ideology – without inverted commas – which makes the situation more complex.³³

Paradoxically, turning to Nancy Fraser for a feminist critique of neoliberalism and the co-optation of contemporary feminism, which she calls identity-based apolitical feminism, is not seen as the improper application of an "alien other". "Foreignness" in her case is cancelled out by her perceived "radicalism". The divide between the "right" and "wrong" conceptualization of gender and the internal divide within the "progressive left" needs the legitimization through the power of authorization of "Fraser":

But what I think is important to reflect on in this debate, is, that one cannot simply and self-comfortingly say that the Right is misunderstanding gender or misrepresenting it for the sake of political instrumentalization, and that it has created a straw man without any real-world reference, based solely on a decades old discourse; or that this is simply old wine in new bottles (misogyny and homophobia). We need to face the internal contradictions within progressive politics. ...it is in our best interest to name and face the ideological con-

"THE 1990s DISCOURSE OF CALLING FEMINISM AN 'ALIEN IDEOLOGY' IS ALSO RECONFIGURED IN THE GENDER-IDEOLOGY DISCOURSE OF THE 2010s."

flicts within the progressive camp, otherwise we leave the terrain to the Right. Clarity about the differences of our own definitions is a prerequisite for that.³⁴

At the same time the author also formulates that it is dangerous to embrace a queer or trans politics of sexuality as the right-wing populist discourse would attack gender as ideology by seeing it as a matter of political correctness, which is nothing but a matter of mere words of naming dictated by a particular individual's arbitrary choices. According to this neo-Marxist logic, a queer conceptualization of gender, which is symbolically associated with Judith Butler's name in this discourse, would leave "us", feminists, defenseless against the charges of gender ideology that is defined as the propaganda category of the trans lobby. The discontinuity between sex and gender is therefore not desirable as that "minority" position would undermine and divert the critical gaze from the "real" material problems of the economic structure of neoliberal capitalism in "women's" life. This position runs the risk of echoing the Orbán regime's discourse of anti-intellectualism:

Fourth, many writers use it in trans and genderqueer scholarship and activism to mean *gender identity*: a person's felt sense of identity, meaning identifying or not with being born male or female. This is evidenced by the expression "gender assigned at birth", referring to the fact that it might not correspond to the person's later defined gender identity, or the practice in core countries with languages having gendered pronouns that when introducing oneself, one should identify one's "preferred pronoun", on the basis that we "cannot assume one's gender" on the basis of appearance. So, in this sense *gender* does not mean an analytical category to describe the social components of our being a woman or man, attached to our sex (being female or male, e.g. girls should do this, boy should do that).³⁵

I agree with the author's proposal to start a debate about the effective politics of feminist research that inevitably involves the re/conceptualization of the category gender. However, as the current article has argued, unlike her, I do not see the different meanings of gender within feminism to be a matter of ambiguity or of an unfortunate influence of "Anglo-American countries", let alone a "practical" act of reducing transgender relations of power into a matter of individual claims of mere words, choosing a preferred identity allegedly captured by pronoun preferences.

In my understanding, we need to cut across the binary thinking of sex and gender and think through the discourse model I have proposed here. It argues for the socially regulated articulations of partial distinctions of the sex/gender system and materiality and symbolic encoding. Without such a move, the desirable debates within "progressive politics" turn out to be what Laurent Berlant calls "spectatorial sports" of self-destruction

among harmed collectives in the public sphere waged in binary distinctions that are set in the first place on the terms of the more powerful: in this case, those of the regime.³⁶

It would be then possible to see that social divisions of power also exist at the level of symbolic representation, expressed in images and texts inflected with ideologies, including those having to do with legislation and rights. Furthermore, regarding the global movement of theories, in different cultural traditions and societies, academic narratives exposing the "critical potential of gender" can be caught in different matrices of power, foregrounding and valorizing different elements of meaning that are subject to ongoing processes of contestation and change. As Nira Yuval-Davis puts it,

What is important is to analyze how specific positions and identities and political values are constructed and interrelate and affect each other in particular locations and contexts. Similarly important would be an examination of the particular ways in which the different divisions are intermeshed. (Yuval-Davis, 200)³⁷

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