

Reclaiming Hegemonic Masculinity in the Context of Populism

Approaches to Overcoming It

Erzsébet Barát

1. Introduction

In my chapter I study the ideological work done by the discourse of gender ideology in the past ten years of Hungarian populism by the state. I shall present the three major narratives of that rhetoric culminated in the ban of the Gender Studies MA (2018) and show its most recent rearticulation in the two parliamentary decisions amid the Covid-19 pandemic: The political declaration that rejects the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (June 2020) and the introduction of the category of ›sex at birth‹ (March 2020) that in effect precludes later modifications of sex in transgender people's official documents. I argue, drawing on Michael Kimmel's observation (2017), that these acts are expressions of the angry white men's claim – mobilised by a rhetoric of fear – for compensation for their alleged ›humiliation‹. Yet, the discreditation of the category of gender as an ideology mobilises not only the exclusionary radical right wing or mainstream populism of the government but to some extent, sadly, the stance of part of the targeted ›enemy‹ of feminism as well in their effort to explore what they see as ›deficits‹ of our own progressive politics. Regarding the possibilities of overcoming the strategic stigmatisation in the service of ideal masculinity, I argue that the emergence of ›gender ideology‹ may also index a populist moment for a radical project of democracy mobilised around the formation of a ›feminist people‹. It should function as an empty signifier of flexible inclusivity organised as a space of trust instead of hate. This move hinges on decentering gender and its foundationalist anchoring in a biologized conceptualisation of ›sex‹ reiterated equally by the misogynistic voice of the government and transphobic discreditation of ›gender‹ by ›progressive‹ feminist voices. This decentering may happen through the decoupling of masculinity from an essentialized male body, through queering the normalized perception of biologically given bodies.

2. Theoretical concerns

The point of departure for my reflections on the effective stigmatisation of gender in the analysis below is masculinity. I am aware of the potential feminist disappointment about that choice, arguing that most of the space and attention is already given to men. I do not pursue, however, the study of masculinity at the expense of (the study of) women. Even if the relationship between women and power has always been uneasy,¹ I contend that we first need to expose the unsettling and unsettled gender relations of power mobilised by an aggrieved entitlement of masculinity that fuels despair and rage across diverse groups of men today, organising around a homogenized ›we‹ and reclaiming the hegemonic ideal of manhood. In order to expose and understand the implied privileges that are at stake in the current systemic discreditation of gender as ideology in the right-wing populist discourse of Hungarian politics, we need to study and make visible the implied meanings of manhood. That may help to sidestep the internal division amongst Hungarian feminist groups emerging in the 2010s around the progressive, structural feminism versus gender identity, human rights oriented queer feminism divide. Such a divide comes caught in the dominant rhetoric of hate and may dangerously play in the hands of this masculine rage regardless any intention (see Barát 2021 forthcoming). I think it is very important for feminist scholars to explore the signifying practices of conceptualising ›gender‹ and the relations of power they are embedded in to see if and how they are caught within a given form of oppression. Therefore, the distinction between strategies for exclusionary and transformative progressive collective action requires, amongst other things, that we explore the assumptions concerning ›gender‹ and see if those understandings may mobilise a radical democratic ›feminist people‹. As Jenny Gunnarsson Paine (2019) argues, the global emergence of gender ideology in the past decade can be also seen as Chantal Mouffe's (2018) ›populist moment‹ in women's global mobilisation against authoritarian and conservative depoliticising strategy of gender and sexuality politics. This may be a moment for feminism to cut across its own internal divisions and open up to progressive reconfigurations of masculinity through Jack J. Halberstam's (1998) concept of male masculinity.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is introduced by R.W. Connell in 1987 to grasp the ideal form of manhood over other forms of masculinity. She takes issue with the dominant approaches to gender in sociology at the time and challenges the consensual, taken for granted meaning of the category as a self-contained set of pre-given character traits that should correspond to one's biologically given sex,

¹ Since my data mostly comes from political communication mediated in the print media, it is important to note that the relationship between women and power has always been ›un-easy‹. See for instance, Sreberny/Van Zoonen 2000; Vavrus 2002.

setting up a corresponding typology of so-called gender roles. Ironically, the canonised model of sex is conceptualised according to a logic that privileges ‚male‘ as the ›obvious‹ measure of categorisation rooted in biology and as such producing a distinction of binary opposition between the ›two genders‹ at the expense of ›female‹ and its corresponding social roles for women. To change the universality, Connell proposes a dynamic approach to gender, seeing it as an active socially regulated process of negotiations at the intersection of multiple relations of domination, such as class, race, and sexuality. Connell later revisits the explanatory power of the concept together with James W. Messerschmid (2005) in the light of the social changes of global capitalism and they suggest that the concept needs to be made more dynamic, i.e. needs integrating further dimensions of power relations to study other forms of masculinity, such as blue-collar male worker, gay middle-class white man, subcultural young hard rock male fan, Roma urban unemployed man, or transman. The ultimate objective should be to see the productivity of the other, non-normative forms, how (much) they challenge and subvert the perceived value and position of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, they do not develop what this ›further‹ mobilisation should entail. I argue that this move needs to take on board Halberstam’s imagining of masculinity without men, when masculinity is not tied to a biologized male body.

As I have argued elsewhere (Barát 2020), there is one epistemological move to make if we want to see this dynamism integral to the multiple formations of masculinity. It entails a discursive approach to categorisation that draws on James Paul Gee’s (2014) model of discourse.² Multiplicity and so heterogeneity is integral to the formation of all categories, argues Gee. In so far as they register as ›intelligible‹, sufficiently coherent concepts for a given community, their ›oneness‹ is the effect of a dominant logic that renders the multiple constituent elements of their meaning into a more or less coherent pattern at a given historically contingent moment. Furthermore, this plurality also means that any emerging category overlaps with multiple others whose constituent elements of meaning it may have in common with them, even if arranged into a different pattern of meaning. Consequently, this difference is only a matter of relative and not absolute distinction; the overlapping boundaries of the category are seen as relatively flexible, potentially open to reconfiguration. Whether this epistemologically possible change becomes

2 According to Gee, discourse is defined as language-in-action, as an intertwined nexus of text/context; consequently, it is not possible to reduce to language (self-contained representations) only. It is impossible to operationalise the binary distinction between a purely symbolic representation of a thoroughly material formation of reality. Texts do not come into a ›documenting‹ relationship with reality but the two are in a mutually constitutive one. The various social practices are different in their relative degree of orientation to the symbolic practices of signification or to that of the material practices of social life.

an actual change and in what ways is a matter of political viability in a particular matrix of power relations. Political viability, or historical contingency, serves then as a relative but relevant limit to our (academic and activist) understanding of the category *>gender<* as well. The emerging meanings of gender are therefore neither a matter of an arbitrary free play of symbolic constructions only nor that of the manifestation of some pre-given material reality of self-explanatory sex, but a socially regulated articulation of contingency and as such even open to the formation of a radical *>feminist people<*. The meaning of gender is ideological only in the sense that it reiterates the configuration of relations of domination as *>given<* and common sense or at least *>unchangeable<*.³ Consequently, any meaning of *>gender<* that draws on the hierarchical binary of sex against and over gender is ideological and comes caught in the reiteration of heteropatriarchy that is the gate-keeper of men's *>ownership<* of masculinity indexing power.

The accusation of (academic or activist) feminism as *>gender ideology<* emerged in the 1990s as a global response of right-wing populism to the crisis of the neoliberal hegemony within a nationalistic framework (Gunnarsson 2019). This populism is mobilised by a rhetoric of fear, argues Ruth Wodak (2015), that is triggered by gender, the key analytical category of feminist critique, defined to mean a *>hostile concept of propaganda<* threatening *>us, the people<* that is driven together by a legitimised feeling of hate in the face of the perceived threat. This *>we, the people<* functions as a nodal point of cohesion, as an *>empty signifier<* that articulates multiple chains of equivalent differences to exclude others, multiple narratives of exclusion. According to Ernesto Laclau (2005) the signifier is empty, or *>hollow<* of explicit political principles, identities, and ideologies. The formation of a *>we<* can also be possible beyond the exclusionary stigmatisation of right-wing populism and available for the radical left. I argue the formation of a *>we<* of radical inclusivity instead entails a *horizontal* logic around a nodal point of *>us, feminist people<* mobilised by *>social justice<*, by a trust of solidarity. This formation is very different from the top-down exclusionary logic of right wing populist organising in the name of some allegedly shared and universally valid *>moral principle<* *above* those of the enemy, setting up an absolute binary distinction of *>us<* *against and over* *>them<*. I define this trust elsewhere (Barát 2020, forthcoming) drawing on Laurent Berlant's (1998) concept of intimacy defined as *>mobile processes of attachment<* (*ibid.*: 286). It works against the hegemonic understanding that *>only one plot counts as >life<* (*ibid.*), i.e. that only one concept of gender should count as *>the properly feminist<*

3 It is Denise Thompson (2001) who sidesteps the post-structuralist collapse of meaning and ideology through the category of hierarchical power relations: »What we are always in is systems of meaning, whether [the given] meanings are ideological or not depends on whether or not they are used in the service of domination.« (Thompson 2001: 27)

one. I think this trust outlined by Berlant is also different from Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism as it is not organized by political contestation for achieving emancipation where differences are imagined to be confronted but rather a dynamic space of multiple intensities where we can trust each other to disagree, to accept that there may emerge unpredicted distractions and we can still carry on together.

3. Weaponisation of legislation amid Covid-19

In my analysis I connect three legislative events in the past three years in Hungary: (1) the ban on the MA in Gender Studies in October 2018; (2) the discriminatory change to Act I of 2000 on the *Registration of Citizens' Personal Data and Address*, resulting in the impossibility of rectification of one's personal documents by introducing 'sex at birth' in May 2020; (3) parliament's adaptation of the Government's declaration that rejects the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in June 2020. The argumentation supporting the government's stance in the three documents mobilise the same gender-ideology discourse as a major rhetorical element of the right-wing populist political discourse developed by the Fidesz-KDNP government since 2010, over their three subsequent periods of ruling. The stigmatised meaning of gender as 'hideous ideology' has worked effectively as an empty signifier. The routine intimation of hate speech organised around the nodal point of 'gender/ism' over the years has made this populist meaning 'common sense' at the intersection of three main chains of equivalences. Paradoxically, the accusation itself has become an expression of neo-conservative heteropatriarchy whose success, similarly to any other ideologies, hinges on the familiarity of meanings to the point of escaping (critical) recognition, working as 'obvious, self-explanatory' knowledge and unquestionable 'truth'. This is particularly the case when that hate speech is routinely authorised as 'normal' in everyday conversation by the very power of the state. Ultimately, I want to expose that the different forms of the reiteration of 'gender ideology' in the three legislative events are indirectly indexing the articulation of power as 'obviously' attached to male masculinity. It is Halberstam (1998) who makes the critical move and exposes the heteropatriarchal ideological investment in naturalizing the ownership of masculinity granted to white heterosexual men, which is anchored in the collapse of sex and gender. It is their empiricist binary distinction that marginalizes or even erases as 'nonsense' more progressive versions of the masculine, such as female masculinity, like the figure the stone butch, the tomboy, the androgynous, or most recently the transman (and transwoman). In my analysis I shall deconstruct the *myth of men's entitlement to masculinity*, the very condition of male access to power. The focus of my analysis is on the conceptualisation of the 'we' the ideal reader is to assume, on the logic that informs the conceptua-

lisation of the ›we‹ and explore if it is mobilised by exclusionary practices of hate or by inclusion intimated by trust – to trust that ›we‹ will be able to articulate diverse feminist voices, accept their inevitable disruptions and accept unforeseeable outcomes.

The Hungarian government's populist politics of exclusion culminating in the unidirectional ban of the MA in Gender Studies in October 2018 was effectively presented as a ›legitimate‹ decision through the mobilisation of three narratives of hate.⁴ The first narrative voices the regime's general anti-intellectual politics situated in the field of higher education and research at the time, impinging on academic autonomy and critical thinking. In case of the scholarly field of gender studies this took the specific form of labelling gender and gender studies as ›non-science‹ but ideology. As I argued elsewhere (Barát 2019: 137):

»Whenever the [Hungarian] government wants to reinforce its ›credibility‹, they mobilize this right-wing populist discourse which rallies against anything labelled ›intellectual‹ as a result of its allegedly non-productive, ›parasite‹, even frivolous nature while appealing to ›common-sense‹ and ›productivity‹ in the name of utility and *realpolitik*.« (137)

The second narrative is telling the story of a degree that has its institutional origin at the Central European University, Budapest. In an attempt to discredit the university and legitimise the legislation that practically forced the institution to relocate in Vienna and reopen its campus in September 2019, it was routinely called ›Soros University‹, after its founder, George Soros⁵. Soros' Hungarian Jewish family who fled from the Shoah, his own successful career as an investor in the USA, and his return after the system change in 1989 to found the *Open Society Institute* and the university, both with an explicit mission to spread liberal values, made him the ›ideal trope of threat for the Hungarian prime minister's broader political project of building an ›illiberal democracy‹. This anti-Semitic rhetoric of hate routinely presents anything that is associated with the name ›Soros‹ as threatening ›us, the nation‹. The mere mention of his name can serve as ›evidence‹ for the government to legitimise any policy or law on their agenda against a ›secretly‹ driven ›Soros

4 Cf. Elisabeth Redden 2018. Hungary Officially Ends Gender Studies Programs, in: Inside Higher Ed, 17 October 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/10/17/hungary-officially-ends-gender-studies-programs>

5 The amendments to Hungarian higher education policy directly discriminated against CEU opened in Budapest in 1991, revoking its entitlement to run university programs as a New York State chartered, non-European Union institution unless it opens an actual campus in New York – a non-existent requirement in 2004 when CEU was accredited as a Hungarian private university as well. Cf. Stacey (2018). <https://thepienews.com/news/ceu-forced-to-move-to-vienna/>

plan.⁶ Within this frame, by August 2018, when the Gender Studies MA as well as CEU were under government attack, the degree had no chance to remain accredited as a ›disciplinary degree‹ but ›false science‹ in the service of spreading the dangerous liberal ›alien‹ ideologies of ›Soros‹, the name that meant the merciless ultimate enemy of the ›nation‹.

The third narrative legitimising the ban, which started around the European crisis of forced migration in 2015, was conveniently tied to the same frame through the Soros trope. It mobilised an openly anti-Islamic hate, in the name of fighting against the ›terrorist migrants‹ and ›protect‹ ›our women‹ and our traditional ›Christian family values‹ that are at the same time threatened by ›Brussels‹, the European policies on refugees that ›encourage‹ migrants to come to the European Union and undermine by their ›flooding waves‹ the foundation of the ›real Europe‹. This complex narrative of the ›migration crisis‹ is rendered intelligible through a shrilling discourse of xenophobia where the ›militant Islamic terrorists‹ are said to be mobilised and sponsored as part of the ›Soros plan‹ in agreement with ›Brussels‹.⁷

The three narratives, while explicitly naming the ›enemy‹, indirectly speak the voices of the ideal man concerned about, and entitled to defend – and therefore assumed to be capable to perform the task beyond doubt – the alleged values of the ›nation‹ constructing them as particular figures: productive laborer, respected head of the traditional Christian family, and patriot warrior. Ironically, their desirability is articulated by the political elite depriving the (male) citizens of any autonomy by vindicating the entitlement to ›thinking‹, but the contradiction is naturalised and even made desirable effectively within the ideology of nationalism. As long as the top-down intellectual position of the ›male leader‹ is effectively presented as the heroic ›freedom fighter‹ leading ›us‹ ›against Brussels‹ and the ›cosmopolitan liberal values‹ associated with the Soros trope undermining and meddling with our newly ›won‹ autonomy against the ›Soviet power‹, all groups of men are mobilised

6 See for instance the law on NGOs in June 2017, Act LXXVI of 2017 on the Transparency of Organisations Supported from Abroad, forcing the civil sector, in the name of ›transparency‹, to indicate on their website that they are ›foreign‹ funded organisations and also freezing any national funding over € 22,000 from outside Hungary – meaning ›alien and as such threatening‹ organisations. The Open Society Institute founded by George Soros is certainly not the only ›foreign‹ donor but all other ones were systematically collapsed into his figure and thereby legitimising the violation of the prohibition of discrimination in relation to the freedom of association. See Parrock (2020). <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/18/eu-top-court-to-rule-on-hungary-limits-on-foreign-funded-ngos>.

7 The anti-migration narrative was predominantly established as common sense by several massive billboard campaigns. Their visual imagery, the huge ›vicious looking‹ mug-shot style photos of George Soros could effectively add to the accusations of the textual messages (see Barát 2017).

to regain their ›threatened‹ masculinity. I argue that this new ideal of manhood emerges in the face of the failure of the neoliberal project and its major function is to articulate an increasingly *isolationist* nationalist agenda of neo-conservativism indirectly implicating feminist criticism of gender relations of power ›concealed‹ by the stigma of ›gender ideology‹.⁸

The three narratives are conveniently rearticulated in the subsequent two regulations in the legislator's continued attack on ›gender‹ in spring 2020. The two most recent modifications of law amid the Covid-19 pandemic are articulations of this rhetorical inversion of accusing one's political opponent of ›ideology‹ mobilised around the explicit discreditation of ›gender‹ while implicating the ideologies of right-wing populism as ›common sense‹ voiced in the narratives of the ban. Instead of focusing on measures to protect public health from Covid-19, in March 2020, the Hungarian government used the crisis as a pretext to obtain unlimited power and had the super-majority parliament to proclaim a state of emergency enabling the prime minister to rule by decree. On March 31, 2020, on the very first day of this ruling, the deputy prime minister, representing the Christian Democrats in the coalition, submitted a bill to parliament making it impossible for transgender people to legally change their sex in their personal documents in accordance with their gender – in spite of the availability of its various forms of medical change. The parliament adopted the change to Act I of 2000 on the *Registration of Citizens' Personal Data and Address*. The Hungarian national register now ties for good an individual's gender to the person's »sex at birth« entered in the birth certificate. »Sex at birth« is defined by the lawmaker as a matter of external sex organs and chromosomes established by medicine at birth. This definition in effect entails restricting later modifications in transgender people's official documents. The change goes against international human rights including right to privacy, right to self-determination, and right to human dignity. The legislator argues that

»The sex, registered in the birth certificate, is actually based on the fact established by the doctor, and is declared by the certificate. [...] The sex declared by the birth certificate, however, is the source of further rights and obligations, hence ›sex at birth‹ needs a [legal] definition. *With regard to the fact that biological sex is not possible to be changed completely*, it is necessary to establish in the law that *it is not possible to be changed in the official registration either*.« (Törvényjavaslat T/9934 2020: 23; My transl., italics added)

This quote is the coercive moment of imposing a foundationalist understanding of ›sex‹ that further imposes a one-to-one ›proper‹ relationship between sex and gen-

8 Cf. Hutchins and Tolz's (2015) book on populism in the post-soviet Russian political discourse that is evoked by a similar economic destabilization that discredits democracy and opens up to the rhetoric of hate positioning ›us, the nation‹ but rather against ›Western values‹.

der – though without explicit vilification of transgender people. Through the power of the state, the non-flexible coextensive understanding of sex, sexuality and gender ultimately reinforces the biologically understood men's exclusive entitlement to masculinity that lies at the center of linking power to masculinity. In so far as any approach critical of (hetero-)patriarchy in feminist scholarship problematizes the cause and effect relationship between sex and gender, that criticism will trigger immediately the routine accusation of gender as »ideology«, in defense of the hegemonic ideal of (male) masculinity.

The explicit accusation of gender as the »hideous« ideology of the »trans lobby«, naming the anxiety about the status of »sex«, is formulated in the other legal act, the parliament's adaptation in June 2020 of the political declaration that rejects the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Even if the same regime signed the Istanbul Convention in 2014, six years later it refuses to commit itself to combating gender-based violence against women, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), marital rape, and forced marriage. The policy statement was submitted by three MPs from the co-ruling Christian Democrats Party (KDNP) again, arguing that the convention goes against the country's migration policy when using the term »gender« and therefore Hungary should »consider the aspect of gender identities when offering refugee status« (MTI-Hungary Today, 2020), furthermore, protection of women from domestic violence is unnecessary as it is already enshrined in Hungarian law. The routine evoking of the meaning of gender as destructive ideology that can be deployed in the service of »illegal migration« explicitly resonates with the angry white men's claim to compensation for his imaginary »humiliation« by the »feminists« in collaboration with the »migrants« calling in fact »us, men« in defense of »our values« around the nodal point of »manhood«. »Manhood« functions as an »empty signifier« (in Laclau's sense of the category) around which the diverse groups of men can easily and conveniently come together and unite through imagining themselves »strong« and fail to see that their sense of social justice is built on the backs of various others, singled out as »our enemies«. I argue that the current Orbán government taps into the rage of the »white angry men« in their anti-refugee campaigning since the summer of 2015, appealing to the »strength« of the nation to protect their Christian family values ultimately against and at the expense of women. The success of naturalizing their hate hinges on the empiricist correspondence between »biologically given sex« and the »corresponding forms of femininity«.

4. Conclusion: Masculinity without men

Based on my reflections, I would like to contend that it is (hetero-)sexism hinging on the »ownership« of masculinity by men that is at play in the multiple ideologies

making up the routine calling of gender as *›ideology‹* in the Hungarian government's radical right populism and its powerful hold on the citizenry's imagination. *›Gender ideology‹* as the *›targeted enemy‹* in the semantic center of right-wing populism also functions as an *›empty signifier‹* that never names explicitly but always implicates the actual value at stake and in need of protection: hegemonic masculinity. The ideological work of this empty signifier is then effectively achieved each time hate speech is intimated as the *›norm‹* of public communication organised by the regime's exclusionary populism as long as its premise is left untouched.

Some contemporary feminists in Hungary self-identifying as *›progressive‹* try to understand the reasons for successful appropriation of gender by the government propaganda. They, however, come caught in the mainstream rhetoric of exclusionary populism. They argue that the reason for our feminist failure is the de-politicization of gender that they attribute to transgender activism's claim to *›gender identity‹*. They also call this position *›queer feminism‹* and associate it with the figure of Judith Butler.⁹ Contrary to the allegedly *›human rights‹* agenda, the *›progressive‹* stance sees itself politically effective because they are the ones attending to the *›real‹* social problems resulting in unequal gender relations, the *›structural social problems‹* of the political economy of neoliberalism. Therefore, they see the criticism of transphobia against them unfounded and position themselves as the *›victim‹*, calling for sympathy.¹⁰ I argue that their logic associates the *›identity only‹* meaning with *›ideology‹* as their concern for *›the political economy‹* resonates with a conservative Marxist divide between the economic base and the consequential matters of identity and struggles for rights in the *›superstructure‹*. This divide, by the force of its logic, projects what they call queer feminism as *›gender ideology‹* and so the *›enemy‹* from within while reiterating the government's foundationalist divide between the materiality of sex vs. the social constructions of gender roles when reducing transgender into a meter of identity claims only.

One effective way to expose the mechanism of this *›progressive‹* logic and go beyond it is through the category of male masculinity. If we want to mobilise progressive feminists against the current government's gender regime, we need to form an alliance around a different kind of *›empty signifier‹* one that is organised by the horizontal logic of trust instead of the *›the properly feminist‹* conceptualisation of gender. We need to try to open up the space of self-critique to Halberstam's understanding that masculinity is not necessarily and inherently domineering but can be transgressive when it is not tied to the male body.

9 The misrepresentation of Butler's stance on identity can be best exemplified by her point in *Undoing Gender*: »If the notion of the subject, for instance, is no longer given, no longer presumed, that does not mean that it has no meaning for us« (2004: 179).

10 For a detailed analysis of the debate see Barát (2021 forthcoming).

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