



Interview with Andrea Petö

Gender studies appeared in Central European countries together with democratic transition. First Polish programme was started (under the title of women's studies) in 1992, at University of Lodz, and is still continued here. Although gender studies gained a lot of interest among the students, they were never fully-fledged part of public university programmes. Since the beginning of 'war against gender' they found themselves under ideological attacks, we still experience. That is why we decided to ask Andrea Petö, our colleague and Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University, formerly in Budapest, about position of gender studies in Hungary. Both countries are often compared because of similar political threats and both countries experience attacks on gender studies.

Power of Judgment: How and when gender studies where started in Hungary, what role they played and how were they organized?

Andrea Petö: JiřinaŠmejkalová argued that feminism entered Eastern Europe with the "wrong passport," and explained its relative unsuccessfulness with this fact. After 1989 the higher education system in former communist countries has changed profoundly. The state opened up to different academic approaches, in the meantime the logic of selection changed from political meritocracy to financial elitism. Gender studies benefited from this new openness and gained backing, although

sometimes it lost in institutional competition for financial support.

In Hungary three factors contributed to the [institutionalization of gender studies](#). The first was research on social inequalities and women's employment. This was the pioneering area in which researchers could cooperate with colleagues from beyond the Iron Curtain as early as the beginning of the 1980's. (This beginning proved to be a fatal embrace, however, as the joint research on general issues such as social policies, poverty and inequality currently glosses over gender differences.) Thus it was no accident that in Hungary the first Women's Studies Center was established at the Marx Károly University of Economy (as it used to be called), as this was the institution in which research projects examining women's employment and social stratification were conducted. The second step is the inclusion of gender studies approaches in traditional disciplines of humanities such as history, literary studies or linguistics. Since in post-socialist countries most feminists were academics, highly trained and multilingual woman intellectuals who have engaged in dialogues with scholarship in countries beyond the Iron Curtain, they began to integrate gender studies into the institutions of higher education early on. This was the second factor contributing to the institutionalization of gender studies: feminist literary studies and linguistics as well as English and American studies departments played key roles in this development in Budapest, Szeged, Pécs, Miskolc, Debrecen,

because it was relatively easy for them to build gender-related approaches and works into their curricula and even their degree modules. The fact, that gender studies was mostly embedded in the humanities and less in the social sciences contributed to the “cultural turn” in Eastern European gender studies. The third factor was women’s NGOs in close connection with societal stakeholders. Gender studies has always developed in close connection with the society it was part of, mutually responding and shaping each others’ intellectual climate. In case of Hungary this collaboration was missing.

The Budapest based Central European University (CEU) was where the first one year MA program accredited by the State of New York started in 1996, followed by two year MA programs accredited by the Hungarian State and a PhD Program accredited by the State of New York, and awarded its two year master’s program in English with Hungarian accreditation by the Hungarian Accreditation committee in 2006. So if you look at the chronology of what’s happened in Hungary, you see that the masters’ programme in Gender Studies in Hungarian, which is offered by EötvösLoránd University (ELTE), which is the main university in Budapest, was the first target of political attacks. So initially, it was not CEU but the Gender Studies programme at ELTE that was a subject of vicious attacks in Spring 2017. So it happened through a [general attack](#) on Gender Studies that the Gender Studies programme at CEU became the [next target](#). But if you look at the public discussion, it turns out that nearly everybody has an idea and an opinion on what Gender Studies should be: on what should be taught, what the learning outcomes are, etc.

Power of Judgment: What happened later? What was the background for re-establishing? Closing? Forbidding gender studies?

How would you name the process that lead to disappearing of gender studies in Hungary?

Andrea Pető: Gender Studies will not disappear. On 16th November an active strike was organized by ELTE, CEU and Corvinus University. That means that faculty protested against banning gender studies from the accredited study lists. Colleagues who previously were silently sabotaging gender studies now included gender in the courses they are teaching and that was how they protested against the government. Gender studies become cool. My biggest fear is that colleagues are interiorizing helplessness and they are tired, worn out and depressed. This is how the [polypore state works](#). The polypore state is working strongly with the concept of security and of securitising all possible aspects of life. It is working with the concept of creating and mirroring existing institutions: and I already mentioned the polypore academia. And it is working also with the ideology of familialism. This means that policy is targeting not individuals, but families. So if you look at the CEDAW reports of Hungary or Poland, you see that they are basically replacing the concept of women with the concept of family. So women as independent agents are slowly disappearing from policy documents, and what remains is the concept of family. So, in this context, if you want to understand what happened with CEU and Gender Studies programmes, you see that Gender Studies was first a target and then CEU as an institution became the target with LexCEU. At the moment we are experiencing a socialisational fight in the Gramscian sense about values and power relations and it is the field of science where this is happening. 👁

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