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Challenges of Writing Women's History in Post-Communist Europe

In the spring of 2010, together with other colleagues, we organized a training program for history teachers in Budapest. The purpose was to launch a supplementary history textbook for secondary-level education with the title *History of men and women in Hungary in the long 20th century* (Pető 2008). Our purpose with this book was to summarize the achievements of women's history writing, to mainstream knowledge about women in history teaching, and to make it accessible to secondary-level education. During this teacher training after my talk, a male colleague raised his hand and asked me the following question:

"Andrea, women's history is very interesting, but if I am teaching women's history to my students when will I have time to teach them the history?"

This question illustrates one of the dilemmas I would like to introduce in this brief text. History writing and history teaching still treat women's history separately, as Virginia Woolf wrote nearly a hundred years ago: as an appendix. Paradoxically, some practitioners of women's history consider this separation and particularism a fruitful and promising way to develop women's history. This paper does not aim to contribute to discussions on gender as a category of analysis to discuss whether "gender history" eliminates the transformative potential of using "women's history" or if gender is only a substitute for women and if gender includes men or not. The paper rather considers gender history as a paradigm in history writing and provides a broad overview of this paradigm shift. In the end, I am arguing for a new form of revisionism together while underlining the impact of the new war in Europe on gender history writing.

The beginnings

How can we briefly characterize the situation of writing history about women in Central Europe in 1989? It would be a major mistake to apply the heuristic model

¹ PETŐ 2017: 280-289.

² PETŐ 2018: 1535-1545.

of transitology, which considers 1989 Hour Zero, the point where the investigation begins. Before 1989, the following topics were already present in relation to the history of women: suffrage, education, family, paid employment, and history of the communist women's movement. Mostly as a consequence of the French Annales School, famous women, exceptional personalities, or witches were also accepted research topics. Highly centralized and controlled history writing practices at universities and historical research institutes proved flexible enough, though not to the same extent in the various Central European countries. History writing in Central Europe was not subjected to isolation as in the Soviet Union.³ As of the 1960s, there were productive professional connections: an international committee of historians was set up to facilitate the exchange and communication of historians who had status in the professional establishment. Translations of foreign social and cultural history texts contrasted with the strong censorship and control in the field of political history. Publication of the relevant social history books contributed to identifying and analyzing women as a separate social group. The specificity of Central Europe in Joan Scott's claim: "It was feminist politics that brought 'women' into view as an object of historical investigation" is not valid, rather it was the political ideology of neoliberalism that put 'women' in the focus of scholarly investigation, independently from the NGO scene.⁴ In this context, the social and symbolic construction of gender difference happened to construct 'women' in relation to 'men'.

Cold War divisions became obsolete in 1989. History writing changed, new institutions and departments were established, personal and institutional relations developed across borders, translations of path-breaking books were published and new textbooks were written. The category of memory has been placed at the centre of investigations and in this memory boom process alternative personal stories and new methods such as oral history resurfaced. "Truth" became a personalized matter after decades of institutionalized history writing which localized the individualized subject as the subject of history writing. In this paradigm, women's history writing was introduced on the winning ticket. At the same time, the quickly emerging new historical canon integrated both the previously dominant truth framework and new truths, including women as the subjects of history writing.

During this process, women's history partly functioned as revisionist history because it undermined and revised the previous canon, bringing in a new group as a legitimate focus of analysis. The canon of writing women's history found its place in the national historiographies in Central Europe after 1989. As Liakos pointed out, "Writing history means to internalize the canon, and to be ascribed in a mental geography prescribed by the canon". 5 At the same time, women's

³ KOROVUSKHINA 2000: 151-164.

⁴ SCOTT 2008: 1422-1429.

⁵ LIAKOS 2013: 337.

history was necessarily pushed towards particular history, underscoring out a void in previous historiography. This negative approach is aptly characterized by Liakos: "The idea of not belonging to the canon creates a consciousness of absences and failures which could be described as a 'negative consciousness': Negative in the sense that the consciousness is not defined by what the subject is, but by what the subject is not, that is, the adoption of a perspective of self-exclusion." Therefore, writing women's history defined itself as separate with the hope of filling in that void.

Gender history as "negative consciousness"

Gender as a category of analysis reached Central Europe together with the neoliberal market economy and the Anglo-Saxon dominance in scholarship. Jirina Smejkalova argued that feminism reached Eastern Europe with the "wrong passport" and explained its relative lack of success with this fact. Boyston pointed out that those who promote "gender as a category of analysis" are becoming "propagandists of a particular epistemological order. Both aspects of this statement, "propagandist" and also "new epistemological order," pose certain methodological and political problems. Meyerowitz argued that Scott's article was first published at a very receptive moment in 1986 when research was moving "from scientific to literary paradigms." Just the opposite was happening in this region: from the ideological paradigm it tried to grasp the lost or forged "truth." In this context, gender was not welcome by national historiographies, as Scott pointed out: "Gender' was a call to disrupt the powerful pull of biology by opening every aspect of sexed identity to interrogation."

This position of revising the already existing canon ("being propagandist"), however, had serious consequences as scholars writing women's history failed to strengthen their critical position. It was assumed that the already existing, traditional research topics (women's employment, women's movements, life stories of remarkable women, history of prostitution, etc), and the slow acceptance of cultural and social history as a legitimate form of inquiry will lead to a gender analysis. To the extent that institutionalization is concerned with the promotion of women's history, it was hoped that some kind of "gender turn" would occur in various research institutes of the Academies of Science. This institutional and epistemological development, despite the expectations of many

⁶ LIAKOS 2013: 332.

⁷ SMEJKALOVA 1996.

⁸ BOYDSTON 2008: 558–583.

⁹ MEYEROWITZ 2008: 1346-1356.

¹⁰ SCOTT 2008:1427.

(including myself), did not happen. My summary article in the 2004/4 issue of the Journal of Women's History analyzed the period between 1989 and 2004 as far as the development of women's history is concerned in Eastern Europe. 11 In this article, I underlined that in 1989 women's history was considered a political and intellectual promise and an intellectual stand for historians who were, at the same time, in a position to both promote the construction of knowledge about women and change the methods for writing history. Up to the present, women's history writing did not fulfil these expectations nor become a failed promise in the field of theory production and institutional build-up. My main argument in 2004 was that, if women's history is the captive of the true paradigm, it will always produce the women's counter canon for political history. Or to put it differently: if we define history as a colleague did in the teachers' training program, then women's history writing is being shunted into a lost political and intellectual position. It is only once, when the concept of "woman" itself becomes a category of analysis instead of a stable, homogeneous category in our research that the opportunity to write a solid counter-canon opens up. "Gender" used as a homogenous, self-evident, binary, and sometimes hegemonic category even limited the epistemological innovative potential.

The truth paradigm as a framework for history writing was necessarily strengthened in Central Europe after 1989. The idea was that political freedom made it possible to access the veracity of history because political manipulation was no longer imposed on readers. Previously inaccessible archives have been opened to researchers. That was the period of the "archive fever" described by Derrida. Oral history became a popular method of collecting stories of "how the 20th century really happened" with the aim of counterbalancing the period of communist historiography. In this paradigm, woman's history found a place for itself, joined the chorus demanding the revision of history, and through conferences and conference proceedings began to develop their own canon. This did not happen without problems. Joan Scott, in her very influential and widely quoted Siegrist lecture of 2001, pointed out that her article "Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," published in AHJ in 1986, did not bring the expected intellectual and political breakthrough. Instead of a major transformation spurred by gender as a category of analysis, it led to genderism, meaning that researchers used gender as a category of analysis when it was not necessarily the most useful category, ignoring the intersectional approach. An additional problem derived from the fact that when researchers mentioned gender they really meant "women" or "men". 12

What has happened in Central Europe 18 years after my state-of-the-art summary article was published in 2004? Has women's history succeeded in building

¹¹ PETŐ 2004: 173-183.

¹² SCOTT 2011: 19-37.

out a canon of its own while questioning the concept of the canon itself? Did the results of writing women's history become an integral and indispensable part of history writing, which is confined to a national frame? Was my cautious optimism well founded in 2004 when I wrote in the overview that women's history still remains an appendix, a counter canon? Has gender as a category of analysis produced the expected "epistemological change?" What kinds of changes were initiated by the reappearance of an anti-modernist frame in history writing?

The narrative in which this gender history is being told should be problematized following Claire Hemmings's plea for the formulation of simplistic and teleological narratives. Even so, as I mentioned, there is a tendency to present women's history writing as a failure based on the expectation that there should be "epistemological change." ¹³

My argument now is that precisely the fact that women's history is slowly becoming counter-canon or "negative consciousness" in the newly polarized historical narrative offers new opportunities. The very fact that gender as a category of analysis led to "genderism" should be considered a possibility for change. In my 2004 article, I considered the aim of going all the way from a non-existent intellectual position to integration and institutionalization. I thought it possible, among other things, because women's history belongs to the genre of revisionist history writing, which transforms the methods of history writing and leads to "epistemological change" and includes new, previously forgotten sources in the analysis. This agenda fits into the present trends of history writing and creates political opportunities. The political opportunity presented itself here was very much the opposite of the original aims of writing women's history.

The framework of women's history in Central Europe changed because of EU enlargement at the beginning of this century. The EU acted as the norm owner and successfully initiated and later assisted in the building of gender equality machinery. ¹⁴ By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, some teaching in gender studies began at nearly all universities in Central Europe, either as a topic in mainstream courses or as an elective course that was offered due to the enthusiasm of dedicated teachers. These norm entrepreneurs, female intellectuals, academics, and "propagandists" who, through their language skills or fields of expertise formed contacts with scholars on the other side of the former Iron Curtain, began to introduce gender studies and gender sensitivity to the various institutions of higher education. A key pioneering role was played by the disciplines of literature and linguistics, or English-American studies, which opened courses, supported the publication of journal issues dedicated to gender studies or incorporated gender studies in their curricula to varying degrees. But integration into the history

¹³ HEMMINGS 2005: 115-139.

¹⁴ PETŐ 2009: 1-11.

curricula set forth with a structural disadvantage, as was described in the opening quote, because only thematic courses were integrated – if they were integrated at all. It was impossible to set up a separate specialization in women's history except at the Central European University in Budapest. There were no openings on the labour market, as there were no available professorships tagged as women's history in Central Europe. Due to other reasons not to be discussed here, which are connected to the half-hearted institutionalization of gender equality mechanisms in these countries, it did not help graduates find jobs as academics, or as "femocrats."

The lack of institutionalization, meaning the lack of integration into the main institutions charged with writing history meant that women's history remained outside of the main educational frameworks. The courses where women's history has been taught were mostly labelled social and cultural history, which means that political history as such and as a mode of inquiry remained untouched. On the other side, what one might call the demand side of the women's movement, as we pointed out in our article written together with Berteke Waaldijk, history does not belong to the favourite disciplines of feminist students in higher education. 15 Among the reasons for this lack of popularity, we mentioned that in comparison to gender studies studying history is positivist, because the truth paradigm remains its most important guiding principle, empirical and under-theorized. The "epistemological change" which was very much a constitutive part of other disciplines, has not reached history, partly due to the lack of interest from one group of possible actors. Moreover, interdisciplinary is defined as a meeting point between two disciplines. So, historians, as a body, were not the ones to give the pivotal boost to the writing of women's history in Central Europe.

New Paradigms

Writing women's history emerged in that region as a part of European neoliberal modernity. But the normative power of Europe (the EU) and the international framework have been weakening these past years. The economic crisis in 2008 contributed to the fact that the previously consensual neoliberal concept of Europe became multi-layered and that new actors emerged. Alternative conceptualizations of Europe have gained momentum.

What are the consequences of the present trends as far as the future of writing women's history? In exemplary fashion, the ever-growing revisionist history writing is impacting the Internet and also "history politics," the local byword for using history in order to legitimize political claims. Revisionist history writing is successfully applying the methods and theories that are also used by women's history writing and, in doing so, creating another counter-canon. This one, however,

¹⁵ PETŐ 2011: 74-91.

does not leave space to any other ways of thinking and, most importantly, there is no dialogue between the various (would-be) canons. The best example of this is the quotation policy of work in women's history, where either the works are ignored or crammed together in one footnote referring to the "gender" perspective. Hemmings pointed out that this is a very effective way of silencing and building up narratives and canon. This means that there is a challenge, which is by now also a political challenge, and it is not an internal affair restricted to women's history writing. In her new book, Joan Scott argued that fantasy and psychoanalysis should play a key role in feminist history writing. This is the real divide, which cuts through the truth paradigm. Rothberg states: "Memories are not owned by groups – nor groups 'owned' by memories." Maybe women's historians should stop acting like the owners of their own memory. This might help to convince the history teacher I mentioned in the introduction that there are different historical cultures, not a single and indivisible history.

During the past 12 years, FIDESZ has been under international pressure to comply with written and unwritten laws, but the party continues to be very popular inside Hungary.¹⁹ And despite taking over all possible policy agencies, state institutions and funding opportunities—the illiberal has not encountered or invited the formation of any effective political opposition. This proves that FIDESZ has set up this particular form of successful governance which is not only producing a possible electoral victory but shows new ways for obviously successful governance. In recent years, political scientists and political analysts were forced to reconsider not only their analytical toolkit but also their concepts to try to understand this new phenomenon—calling it "democratic authoritarianism," "the illiberal state," or "mafia state," just to list a few. With the Polish sociologist Weronika Grzebalska comparing Hungary and Poland, we argued in our previous work about a new form of governance stemming from the failures of globalized (neo)liberal democracy which created states that are weak for the strong and strong for the weak.²⁰ Based on its modus operandi, we call this regime an "illiberal polypore state" due to the fact that it feeds on the vital resources of the previous political system at the same time contributing to its decay. Hungary, indeed, is an example of this.

The polypore state works with what is referred to as "mnemonic security," as well as the control of hegemonic forms of remembrance.²¹ The translation of history and its application, and thus their identity-shaping effect, are becoming a

¹⁶ HEMMINGS 2005: ibid.

¹⁷ SCOTT 2011: ibid.

¹⁸ ROTHBERG 2009: 5.

¹⁹ PETŐ 2021.

²⁰ GRZEBALSKA & PETŐ 2016; GRZEBALSKA & PETŐ 2018: 164-172.

²¹ MÄLKSOO 2015: 221-237.

geopolitical factor. After 1989, fuelled by anti-communist sentiment within the former Eastern Bloc countries and the retributions that took place during the Soviet occupation, anti-communism became the foundation along with the revision of the progressive political tradition at the national and international levels. Memory politics plays a key role in this process. Different states are silencing stories about their own techniques of discrimination that are inherent parts of their history in order to prove that they are victims. The memory politics of the "polypore state" is to duplicate, depoliticize, and empty the narrative about women's presence and agency during the revolution to appropriate its meanings and to attribute the meaning of victimhood and anti-communism.

The recent turn of "herstory" writing in Central European countries left feminist historians and secular human rights-based activists puzzled. The illiberal memory politics is not coming from anywhere.

Representatives of "new history" argued that writing political history was the centre of national history writing. ²² As was the case with the writing the history of 1956, national history and political thinking are processes of inclusion and exclusion. At the heart of this narrative is the male citizen, who is fighting for the nation. Everybody else, like women or ethnic minorities, is on the margins. As Gianna Pomata argued, gender history is analyzing national and universal history as far as gendered characteristics, symbols, play a role in historical events and processes. ²³

The novelty of "new history" is the inclusion of class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis. But this "new history" is no more a genre of the "writing of history" but rather constructed an alternative "culture of history," making systems and points of connection to the past with the construction of a plurality of interpretations instead of one canonized narrative. This narrative strategy offers a new method for gendering history but should fit into and refer to the "old canon" and becomes one of several narratives about the nation and democracy. This plurality of discussion also influences the definition of what sources are, as the question is no longer "what has happened" but rather a redefinition of the relationship to the past based on visual sources, statues, testimonies, and rituals.

Writing women's history in Central Europe has a specific intellectual history.²⁴ In this paradigm, woman's history found a place for itself, joined those demanding the revision of history based on oral history testimonies, and began building its own canon through conferences and conference proceedings. During this process in the early 1990s, women's history partly functioned as a revisionist history because it undermined and/or revised the previous canon, bringing in a new group, namely women as the legitimate focus of historical analysis.

²² BURKE 1991.

²³ POMATA 1993: 42.

²⁴ PETŐ 2017: 280-289; PETŐ, 2018: 1-11.

Women's history writing emerged in that region as a part of European neoliberal modernity in the transition from communism to democracy in 1989. But the normative power of Europe (the EU) and the international framework has been weakening in recent years. The triple crisis, i.e., the financial crisis in 2008, the refugee crisis together with security problems, contributed to the fact that the previously consensual neoliberal concept of Europe became multi-layered and that a new actor emerged. Alternative conceptualizations of Europe have gained momentum and different forms of illiberal governance, as well as other important institutions, have influenced the infrastructure of writing history. These characteristics of writing women's history as a revisionist history connected to "negative consciousness" made it extremely vulnerable in the period of the second transition, when polypore illiberal states with a populist urge for reconceptualization began to develop.

According to Tucker's typology, historical revisionism presents three strategies: *significance-driven* revisionism, that is, when there is a change in what historians find significant in history; *evidence-driven* revisions, when new evidence is discovered; *value-driven* revisionism, when historical events and processes are evaluated due to a new system of values gaining hegemony. These three revisions cannot be divided so rigidly, but women's history writing belongs to value-driven revisionism, which makes women's history vulnerable to populist redefinitions. Women's history writing has never reached the status of significance-driven revisionism, particularly because it is a part of the "new history." Demanding that women's stories should be included on the basis of ethics is not enough, as this process of revision is a political power struggle and the actors should understand how people are mobilized for different struggles and how politics works.

The fact that the post-modern turn combined with the emerging importance of personal recollections about events (ego documents, oral histories, testimonies, diaries etc.) as sources²⁸ has resulted in the opposite effect: the marginalization of professional historians and an overwhelming description of personal experiences instead of theorizing while marginalizing certain experience groups but prioritizing some like women.

The use of women's history by illiberal memory politics is informed by the populist urge. When analysing the transition of 1989, Duncan Light pointed out that the various nations of Central Europe were moved "by the desire to construct new post-communist identities, characterized by a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely Westward-looking orientation." Now a deepening reversal

²⁵ Veritas Institute in Hungary, Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in Poland.

²⁶ TUCKER 2008: 1-15.

²⁷ PETŐ 2017: 41-51.

²⁸ GYÁNI 2006: 1199-2008.

²⁹ LIGHT 2000: 157-176.

is present: these identities are not democratic, not pluralist, not capitalist, and, first and foremost, not westward looking. Instead, the community of jointly experienced suffering defines national identity. And the community itself is seen as anti-pluralist. The newly emergent victorious anti-modernism, which from a social and spiritual standpoint questions neoliberalism, also turned history into an ideological weapon in order to reach its political aims and to offer a liveable, real, and acceptable alternative future. This anti-modernism goes hand in hand with revisionist history writing (and "history politics") which defines the nation as a community of victims (always referring to who caused the suffering), and offers redemption in the near future. As a result of this revisionist history writing, big meta-narratives are being constructed, new methods are used and new sources are discovered, which refer to the position of the narrator of the story. This narrative position, as Eric Hobsbawn wrote it in *The Guardian*, comes down to: "my truth is as valid as your truth." This stance entails a general opposition to universalism in non-traditional history writing. This anti-universalism and the relative statute of truth connect revisionist history writing to women's history writing. This connection is transformed into a socialization fight, to use Gramsci's words. Both streams define new historical sources as legitimate historical sources. Revisionist history writing is fighting against communist history writing while women's history opposes the sanctification of social hierarchies.³¹

The familial turn as a major component of the polypore state emphasises the woman's role as caregiver, wife and daughter. This type of history writing is based on the fetishization of complementary gender differences as we saw before 1989. And if it is not accompanied by critical scrutiny of its production, it can be fraught with the same dire consequences as ignoring that very difference.

While gender studies programs are being closed, the board is being removed from the department and the teachers usually stay. Except in Russia or Turkey, where teachers are locked up. One escape route is writing women's history as opposed to gender history. The emerging anti-gender discourses have a major impact as far as the future of writing women's history is concerned. The turn in women's history writing is a hegemonic fight, in the Gramscian sense, for controlling the process of writing history. Revisionist history writing is successfully applying the methods and theories which are also used by women's history writing and, in doing so, it creates another counter-canon. As far as the politics of presence is concerned, there are women in history but in a fundamentally different framework. The triple crises of 2008 also dictated the challenges women's history writing confronts as revisionist history writing while at the same time, anti-gender movements are challenging the definition of gender.³²

³⁰ Guardian, 15 January, 2005.

³¹ PETŐ 2017: 45-51.

³² KOVÁTS & PETŐ 2017: 117-133.

The "new history" writing opened up space for an even "newer history" which is using the same revisionist methods. Only politics and the rethinking of relationships to politics can change power relations in this hegemonic fight, especially in the new phase after Russia's war against Ukraine. Our colleagues in Ukraine have been underlining the problems of the mismatch between the feminist critical theory of nationalism and militarism and their everyday experiences. When feminist scholars demand more weapons and post about their love for their homeland and nation, that raises questions in the international feminist community. The question of separation between history and women's history can be overcome by this value-based revisionism. Especially since Ukrainian feminists, as so many women who did fight and die for their homeland's hope, can transmit the equality they gained on the battlefield to post-war everyday life in peacetime.³³ Should they be successful, so that the opening question of this paper will be pushed to obscurity of the pre-war past?

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³³ HRYTSENKO 2022.

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