

Breaking out of the deadlock

Possibilities of feminist strategizing in the age of neoliberalism and illiberal populism

Summary by Dalma Feró

The Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung Budapest held its forum “Gender equality – a ‘competitive advantage?’” on 29 September 2016 within the framework of its regional program “Gender equality in East-Central Europe”. On the occasion of the publication of the foundation’s volume entitled [*Solidarity in Struggle – Feminist Perspectives on Neoliberalism in East-Central Europe*](#), the forum raised questions about the relationship between struggles for gender equality and economic interests. A central question addressed was whether it is a good feminist strategy to “sell” gender equality to business and politics with arguments like “women’s participation in the labor market boosts the GDP” and “the human resources of women need to be used better”, what theoretical and political consequences this strategy has for the cause of women’s rights. Some of the book’s authors as well as other experts and activists were invited to the forum to discuss these and related questions.

Eszter Kováts (FES Gender program) started her opening remarks by pointing out that in spite of neoliberalism’s huge academic literature, any mention of neoliberalism in Hungary is often met with incomprehension or accusations of unscientific and ideologically biased drivel. The scene of feminist activism is no exception: many do not understand why other feminists discuss women’s rights in relation to neoliberalism or talk about different feminisms since they take the framework of gender mainstreaming and the approach of gender equality as competitive advantage (“gender equality pays off”) for granted. The question arises, though, whether feminists should really argue within the framework of mainstream economics, as this language of efficiency overemphasizes women’s individual choices and responsibility (e.g. individual strategies to break the glass ceiling and close the wage gap, better time management to balance work and private life, etc) while it extenuates or completely ignores the systemic relations that their possibilities are embedded in and constrained by, especially in the case of more disadvantaged women. Quite a few questions arise from the perspective of both feminism and leftist politics. Can a leftist alternative to the neoliberal political-economic system ignore feminism and can feminism ignore the realities of this system? How is the rise of far-right populism connected to the selling out of leftist politics to the neoliberal world order? How are our intimate relationships affected by the pervasive logic of economic efficiency? How are these questions raised in East-Central Europe, where democracy and human rights appeared to be naturally connected to a form of capitalism after the regime change and where public discourse is still permeated by the self-colonizing narrative of “catching up with the West,” which manifests itself among others in the uncritical adoption of the EU’s gender policies?

The volume that occasioned the forum aims to find answers to these questions. One important topic that the volume’s studies reflect on is the structural conditions of human rights activism after the regime change, for instance, how the mostly foreign donors influenced the agenda. Another issue that the studies explore is the failure of the “catching up with the West” narratives to account for

both the feminist heritage of state socialism and the region's position within global power relations, the consequence of which is that this narrative has rendered the struggle for gender equality vulnerable by associating it with attitudes about the neoliberal project of the EU. Kováts argued that the framework of neoliberalism can be useful to examine how our agenda is linked to other agendas and how this tie-in sale leads to the widespread questioning of the post-WWII human rights consensus, the basis of the European community of values. The problem of right-wing populism is no temporary disruption in the course of liberal progress, nor can it be solved with old answers: pushing the human rights consensus and protecting the current neoliberal EU only feeds right-wing populism and deepens the crisis. It is a challenge for leftist and feminist politics to face the structural deficits of the EU, to overcome the false dichotomy of progressive tolerance vs. conservative backwardness, and to provide new alternatives through proactive politics instead of reactive ones. The volume attempts to contribute to the debates about these issues, Kováts closed her remarks.

The forum's moderator, **Andrea Pető** (historian, Central European University) introduced the forum by reflecting on the bad connotations of both feminism and neoliberalism in the academic literature of the countries of the region. *Solidarity in Struggle* helps to understand these negative attitudes by reexamining the heritage of 'state socialism' and 'state feminism', which has since 1989 been predominantly interpreted in hegemonic liberal western frames, and by exploring the relationship between feminism and the economic-political system emerging victoriously from the Cold War. This global system called neoliberalism is founded on an even harsher exploitation of women, which is why some theorists talk about a "neoliberal neopatriarchy." At the same time, the language of women's rights is used as a source of neoliberalism's legitimacy: since individual emancipation and success fits well with the logic of neoliberalism given that it disregards structural factors, successful women are in the center of a co-opted version of feminism that helps uphold the system without actually furthering women's rights. Pető suggested that two strains of critique attest to the unsustainability of neoliberalism: the growing right-wing populism contrasting it with the illiberal state, and the leftist feminist critique contrasting it with a democratic alternative. This volume exemplifies this latter critique and evinces the need for such an alternative, she concluded.

Anikó Gregor (Faculty of Social Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University) delivered an introductory speech about the connections of neoliberalism and feminism in East-Central Europe. She first talked about neoliberalism as a complex phenomenon, which, in Sylvia Walby's formulation, started as an economic project, then became a governmental program, and then an institutionalized social formation. From an economic perspective, neoliberal ideology promotes the importance of free markets and free trade and the deregulative role of the state (both on national and international levels) and is characterized by privatization, tax reduction, and austerity crisis management measures cutting welfare expenditures. From the perspective of politics, neoliberalism is a kind of governance, a set of principles and rules upholding the existing unequal power relations and thus the power of the economic and political elite by shifting the weight of decision making processes from democratic practices to supranational economic institutions. From the perspective of social values, neoliberalism permeates everyday life interactions and discourses with its management- and production-orientedness as well as its focus on individual responsibility and disregard for structural factors: it has a moral perspective that serves to evaluate individuals and erode solidarity. In this system, patriarchy

manifests itself in new forms like for instance in the ideology of “familism”, which means that with the dismantling of the welfare state, the importance of family is emphasized as an ideology to prop up the delegation of care-work from the state to family members, mostly women, in the form of unpaid work.

Feminist movements in East-Central Europe tend to be blind to neoliberalism due to historical reasons, proceeded Gregor. First, in the era of transition, the liberal human rights paradigm was dominant in democracy building as these countries joined international networks and their liberal elite normatively enforced the universalistic human rights framework and adopted the international organizations’ policy proposals. Second, “state feminism” left a mixed heritage that feminists had to relate to in a new international environment. Third, the gender equality policies of the EU have also moved strongly towards the economic advantage framework. The weakness or lack of the status quo’s critique has given rise to “market feminism” (which aims to sell feminism with the argument that equality pays off), “choice feminism” (which ignores that free choice does not lead to equality and does not problematize the social context of choice, e.g. prostitution debate), and “neoliberal feminism” (which promotes the overcoming of structural barriers on an individual level). However, new forms of solidarity have also emerged recently, for instance, the coalition between nurses and teachers in Hungary, closed Gregor her lecture.

Zofia Łapniewska (economist, Scotland’s Economic Research Centre, Glasgow Caledonian University) talked about feminist economics and the ethics of care. Feminist economics is a heterodox approach, a criticism of and an alternative to mainstream economics. Feminist economists focus on traditionally disregarded areas like women’s unpaid work and aim to reformulate macroeconomic goals such as to be guided by the ethics of care. The ethics of care is a set of sensibilities that every morally mature person should develop alongside the sensibilities of justice morality, and which develop when people experience both caring for others and being cared for by others. Care mostly burdens women but it also implicates other disadvantaged groups, which might have difficulties accessing care. Care is widely considered to be insignificant and belonging to the private sphere, in spite of the fact it often leads to women’s time and economic poverty. Feminist economists suggest that the artificial and harmful private/public split should be erased to change our understanding and distribution of care, which would be key for a wider social change from an individualistic perspective to a more social and collective way of thinking based on reciprocity, solidarity, and equality. Focusing on care furthermore leads to revise mainstream economics’ view of human nature as driven by objective interest-maximization. A higher form of self-knowledge accepting our relational responsibility and vulnerability can lead to a society of care that is less violent and unhappy than current societies. The relevance of care for the forum’s topic, said Łapniewska, is that the so-called progressive social democratic parties of East-Central Europe have made alliances with neoliberalism and thus drove many disadvantaged people to right-wing parties offering higher redistribution but excluding certain groups from this community of care. The alternative to this should be a leftist politics offering redistribution that at the same time keeps the community of care open, she concluded.

Elżbieta Korolczuk (Södertörn University in Stockholm) could not personally attend the event but in her video message talked about the main challenges for feminist movements in East-Central Europe,

which she said might be more visible in but not exclusive to the region. The first challenge is the building of solidarity within the feminist movement, which is not only divided by huge ideological differences but also by a fight for resources, dwindling foreign donors. The second challenge is the building of solidarity within wider society, including the question with whom, how, and on what terms we should cooperate with. Some of the dilemmas include how long we should ask pro-democratic forces to include women's issues into their agenda, and whether we should try to achieve change from within or steal their media attention. The third challenge is the conservative populist turn, which is not only a transient backlash, but a transnational resurgence of illiberal populism and religious fundamentalism of proportions unheard of before, and which has complicated economic, social, cultural, ideological, and political causes. This right-wing populism selectively borrows elements of liberal and leftist discourse, mostly that of human rights and postcolonial critique, positioning themselves as the true defenders of democracy and freedom. These critiques often echo our own critique of the affinity between feminism and neoliberalism, but while we say that this is an anomaly, conservative populist ideologues claim that feminism has been all about individualism from the beginning, and its destruction of the family leaves us with no support from the state or the family. These resurgent movements typically critique neoliberalism, sometimes not purely on the level of rhetoric as some right-wing populist governments have introduced changes that are actually beneficial for many people and families (as for instance the new child benefit program in Poland). Moreover, they link their critique of feminism and minority rights to the critique of neoliberalism, arguing that this conception of human rights comprises an individualist value system that is used to colonize the world and impoverish nations. This is a critical moment as ultra-conservatives claim the language of anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism, leaving us empty-handed. We thus need to rethink the prospects for feminist mobilization as well as feminist critiques of universal human rights and the colonial elements of UN policies in a world where liberal democracy cannot be taken for granted anymore, closed Korolczuk her speech.

In the **Q&A** session following the first panel, discussing the causes of the conservative populist turn, Anikó Gregor mentioned "familism" not as merely an ideology but as a social state in which people have a very low level of trust for public institutions and political parties, which nationalist ideology can take advantage of with an image of the nation as an idyllic familial community. To a question about the potential of feminist economics to provide tools for the critique of neoliberalism, Łapniewska explained the multifacetedness of feminist economics, arguing that besides the ethics of care, it also focuses on markets, trade, international agreements, finance, women's position in business as well as pension, its aim being to achieve the total equality and well-being of everyone.

The second panel's first speaker, **Melinda Kovai** (Károli Gáspár University) talked about psychology as the technology of individualism and thus a crucial tool of neoliberal subject formation. She remarked, citing Michel Foucault, that each era has its "techniques of the self," the system of knowledge and technology that influences people's behavior and defines the principles and practices of relating to ourselves by way of adjusting individuals to the conditions of production. Applied psychology developed as the technique of the Western self, has adapted to the production conditions of different eras and has become the individualizing discipline of neoliberal societies. Applied psychology emerged towards the end of the 19th century as the disciplining technique of the newly

discovered human resources, meaning that new areas of life have become subject to scholarly intervention. Morality became medicalized as we can see for instance in conceptions about child-rearing and the “good mother”. Until WWII, psychology was linked mostly to philanthropic organizations, during the war, it was discovered as a technology of war (e.g. group therapies), and after the war, it became increasingly applied by the public policies of Western welfare states as well as employers. The 1960s witnessed the so-called psychoboom due to large-scale middle-classization, as psychology became a tool for members of this class to differentiate themselves from others. With the dismantling of the welfare state, psychology became suitable for the practical realization of neoliberal principles. “Your success depends on your mindset” is an emblematic catchphrase of these principles, which do not only suggest that our success depends exclusively on ourselves, but also that it is our moral duty to work on ourselves to better our performance. From this perspective, social structure, social positions, and external conditions are invisible, neither their responsibility, nor the will to change them can be formulated. In the semi-periphery, however, psychology played a different function. In the Soviet Union in the 1920s and in Hungary between 1946 and 1956, psychology was applied by the state in a modernization project that aimed to not only achieve social equality, but also to “catch up” with the West. In this endeavor, it was not the individual that was in the focus, but rather the social conditions of performance: children’s school performance, for instance, was examined in relation to class position. At present, Hungarian psychology serves the same neoliberal subject-forming function as in the West with clinical psychotherapy working mostly as private practice and psychology training having been privatized.

György Mészáros (Faculty of Education and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University) talked about how Christian theological traditions, mostly Catholic traditions, have approached structural inequalities. He quoted a speech by Pope Francis in which he points at structural inequalities and calls for real, systemic change, highlighting that while the widespread view of the church as a rigid structure that reinforces social inequalities is accurate, theological discourse has a different stream as well. This tradition is not rootless. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament refer to the concept of shalom meaning the equal well-being of everyone, and while the institution of jubilee based on the concept may or may not have existed in the times of the Old Testament, Jesus talked about shalom as something that we have to realize in this world. Early Christian communities attempted to realize these principles in communistic communities, and while this did not endure permanently, this tradition survived in monasticism. As the church became a powerful institution, it started to protect its own power and has legitimated various forms of violence and oppression, but the other, equality-oriented tradition of theology has never completely disappeared. In the 1950s-60s, an important change happened in Latin America: solidarity and communality with the poor and oppressed appeared more and more in religious discourse as pastors increasingly recognized the deep structural problems and started to read Marx to understand them. Important in this discourse is that salvation does not only have a spiritual, supernatural dimension but a political one as well: how we create a just world in the here and now. Besides economic inequalities, other though related forms of oppression, including women’s disadvantages, have also been addressed by this movement called liberation theology, where liberation refers to liberation from oppression. This term was coined by Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, who revisited the New Testament and suggested that if we do not see these issues there, we misinterpret the words of Jesus. Liberation theology, although some of its

more radical theologians have been silenced, has become quite prominent in Latin America and influenced other religions, including Islam, Judaism, and other Christian traditions. It is worth knowing about this tradition of Christianity and considering making alliances with it, Mészáros closed his speech.

Weronika Grzebalska (sociologist, PhD student, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw) talked about the possibilities of feminist strategizing in a situation where the only alternative to neoliberalism seems to be right-wing populism. Research suggests that no single-factor explanation of right-wing resurgence will suffice, yet most causes identified by academics and policy experts (e.g. growing inequalities, economic crisis, austerity measures, profound change in the relationship between citizen and state, economic and social insecurity, globalization, shifts in the labor market, detachment of political elites, etc.) amount to neoliberalism. Economic, social, and cultural insecurity gives rise to fear and is thus a fertile soil for right-wing extremism. It is important to note that illiberal ideas did not appear out of thin air: they have been there all along, but now more people are ready to support them. Simultaneously, less people are willing to support the neoliberal status quo, which we have been said is the “only alternative,” not driven by politics or ideology, merely being the rational choice. The polarization between neoliberal “democracy” and right-wing populism continues to structure the political scene.

Solidarity in Struggle makes a contribution to feminist strategizing against this deadlock of neoliberalism and right-wing populism, Grzebalska continued. Gathering lesser known examples of theorizing, intervention, and activism from the region, the volume shows that there always have been alternatives and different visions of the society. It gives ideas for successful actions against neoliberal neopatriarchy as well as illiberal patriarchy, and it encourages us to break out of the deadlock, to reject false alternatives, and to formulate our own visions instead. Some studies make a direct connection between the failure of neoliberalism and the rise of the far right, others point out how the ingraining of neoliberal individualistic values into the fabric of our societies makes collective resistance and social movements extremely difficult. The volume reminds us that we need to rethink the feminist toolkit (e.g. gender mainstreaming, EU legislature, reliance on foreign donors who set the agenda, etc.) and base our strategies on an understanding of structural economic factors of different axes of oppression. To break out of the deadlock, said Grzebalska, we need to have a complex understanding of social justice including issues of redistribution, recognition, and political representation, we need to overcome individualism and the “power to women” perspective and instead build solidarity and community, and we need to strengthen international cooperation on the level of social movements as well as transnational organizations. Finally, we need to acknowledge, take seriously, and address the fears and insecurities that the right has exploited, and rather than demonizing people who hold certain views as not being “open” and “modern” enough, we need to offer a set of progressive reforms remedying these problems.