

Feminism and neoliberalism: Peculiar alliances in the countries of former "state feminism"

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Solidarity in Struggle

Feminist Perspectives on Neoliberalism
in East-Central Europe

ESZTER KOVÁTS (ED.)

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„Women’s revolution”: photo taken during Warsaw Manifa 2010 which was held under the banner “Solidarity in crisis – solidarity in struggle” highlighting the outcomes of the economic crisis and the long-term consequences of post-socialist transition in Poland. Manifa is a yearly feminist demonstration organized on the 8th of March in Warsaw and other Polish cities to fight for the rights of women and other oppressed groups. The slogan “Women’s Revolution” was the name of the feminist festival which accompanied Warsaw Manifa’s for several years. The women on the photo are Manifa activists and festival organizers: Anna Król and Małgorzata Grzegorek.

Photo credit: Ewa Dąbrowska-Szulc

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ANDREA PETŐ

Feminism and neoliberalism: Peculiar alliances in the countries of former „state feminism”

In the countries of former „state feminism”, it is perhaps the term ‘neoliberalism’ next to ‘feminism’ that has a really bad connotation in scientific discourse today. The semi-peripheral situation of former communist countries also determines the circumstances of knowledge production. The experience formulated in the limited communication of ‘state socialism’ on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain with the western side (‘state capitalism’ Fraser 2009:100), and was interpreted in western frames after 1989 (Blagojevic 2009). This frame was a hegemonic liberal one. The present volume is important because, on one hand, it gives a critical analysis of Anglo-Saxon interpretations; and at the same time it also brings examples from the region for analysis to test explanatory principles that have, so far, been considered a given.

With the end of the Cold War – or the ‘end of history’ as Fukuyama called it – liberalism has established a victorious political system that we call neoliberalism, and which, in his view, essentially cannot be improved in any way, so that there is no real alternative to it. The word itself is loaded with political content as its use includes the existence of a new form of capitalism that is distinctly different from previous stages.¹

Based on the study of Anikó Gregor and Weronika Grzebalska, this volume confirms the truth of this statement as neoliberalism has created a special situation from three aspects. First of all, it created the global economic system that has been struggling from one crisis to the next due to the illusion of the free market, privatisation, tax cuts and austerity policies. At the same time, the “crisis rhetoric” is a means for the government, and it makes sure that the power processes of redistribution remain opaque. Secondly, it is a political-ideological system that supports not the reduction but the augmentation of existing societal inequalities by using existing institutional tools to reduce the effective interference

⁴ About East-European varieties see Bohle, Greskovits 2007:443-466.

of citizens with decisions that concern them. And thirdly from the perspective of societal values and culture, as economic values such as efficiency and money determine human values and ideals. This rhetoric permeates the functioning of institutions, too.

How is feminism related to this system? In her work, Beatrix Campbell attached the attribute of 'neoliberal' to neopatriarchy, thus signalling that the two are closely interrelated: The foundation of the system's functioning is a system of male dominance that structurally exploits women as a group (Campbell 2014). Neoliberal policies have led to stronger discrimination of women on the labour market, to the flexibilisation of workforce, to low wages, and to ever worsening working conditions (Moghadam 2005).

However, as Nancy Fraser also put it, feminism is in a complicated relationship with liberalism, and this relationship has not become any simpler in recent times (Fraser 2013, Funk 2004). On the one hand, feminism is based on the ideological ground of the universal equality of all as stipulated in the Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights, which is the foundation for liberalism, and which is implemented through democratic institutions. On the other hand, this relationship legitimates certain social and political practices that are unacceptable for women as a group. Derived from this twofold split, the concept of liberal democracy, based on the separation of the public and the private, is built on excluding certain groups, women among others, from the public space (Pető-Szapor 2004). Neoliberal policies degenerate all tasks of the state that feminists would want to develop. This means that the state redefines the relationship between the state and its citizens by separating the public and private spheres, just the same as it delegates resource-poor areas like care-giving to the most unprotected groups: women and non-governmental organisations. As a consequence of their transient nature and structural vulnerability, non-governmental organisations become the targets for intervention by various donors. This has led to the process of NGO-isation when former state responsibilities are assumed by NGOs, and women's movements have also been organised in these frames (Lang 2012).

There is an entire library worth of literature about how women are the biggest losers of the political regime changes in Eastern Europe after 1989.⁴⁹ Although the societal status of women was not exactly rosy before 1989 either, the situation under state feminism (idealised by several researchers nonetheless) has deteriorated further in politics, the economy and culture.⁵⁰ The elimination of childcare systems has reduced the possibilities of women to take on jobs, the feminisation of poverty has continued. Through their unpaid labour, women must leverage the malfunctioning of healthcare and social service systems. All this is expected from women while they are structurally excluded from political representation. The participation of women in parties is minimal; while NGOs – which are the least permanent systems but are built on self-exploitation – include very many women

² For the debate on this see: Drakulic 2015, Pető 2015

³ For the debate on this see: Funk 2014, Ghodsee 2015, Funk 2015

who try to secure services that used to be provided by the now slimmed-down state. They do this in a structurally weak situation where the values that their work is based upon, such as self-sacrifice, the public good and help, are values of that same neoliberalism which otherwise defines value as measurable income expressed in hard currency and consumption. The critique and changing of this complicated and cruelly efficient system is no easy task. Not only because one needs critical prowess in the jargon of economics so that your arguments are heard at all from a position that is on par with experts who use the rhetoric of efficiency and talk from a power position. But also because supporting women's rights is part of the functioning of neoliberalism as well.

The recent period celebrates the twenty-first century as the time of completion of the unfinished process of women's emancipation. Emancipation as individual success fits well with the neoliberal rhetoric because it disregards structural disadvantages. If we hear the slogan that "women can also do it"; whenever we rejoice about having even more women in top corporate management; or when famous actresses show up to charity galas to help talented girls in disadvantaged positions – all of these cater to the sustenance of a system based on consumption and the glorification of individual abilities and performance.

The fact that this neoliberal system is no longer sustainable today is supported by two additional strains of critique on top of the matter of environmental sustainability. One is the growing right-wing critique that contrasts neoliberalism with the creation of the illiberal state, which is based on different values and affective politics. The triple crisis in Europe since 2008: the crises in security policy, migration and the economy have faced neoliberalism with a massive challenge, as large powers like China and Russia support the efforts to dismantle the relationship between liberalism and human rights that have been there for centuries and appeared to be universal, a taboo and a sine-qua-non. The rights of migrants, the right of women to equality, and the gender quota as a policy tool are all questioned in this process (Pető 2015).

The other strain, which this volume also contributes to, consists of the feminist critique that has relied on feminist economics, political and cultural theory for decades to present the darker sides of how the neoliberal system functions. The studies in this volume assert that there is a democratic and inclusive alternative to neoliberalism. There are several case studies in the volume: They rely on interviews with sex workers in Germany, the economic situation of women living in the countryside in Hungary and the loss of housing rights to present how a critique of neoliberalism is possible from a democratic perspective. Values like equality, empathy and responsibility, which were once values of left movements at the end of the 19th century, are more topical and more popular now than ever. There should just be someone who represents them. Clearly there is a demand.

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