

ON ADVOCATES OF ANTI-MODERNIST EMANCIPATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA PETÖ

BY JITKA GELNAROVÁ

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Andrea Petö is a professor at the Department of Gender Studies at the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest. Her research areas include gender history, gender and politics, political extremisms and oral history. In her research she deals with sensitive periods in Hungarian history from a feminist perspective. She concentrates, among other things, on the gendered memory of WWII and the Holocaust and transitional justice. She focuses on women as victims of war crimes, as well as perpetrators, and applies the women's history claim 'make them visible' to women who for a long time remained outside the scope of scholarly attention – female perpetrators of war crimes and women involved in fascist movements. She has studied the background and political agency of women involved in the Arrow Cross Party (Hungarian Nazi party). She also researches the reasons for the far right's appeal to women today. Andrea Petö has published extensively on women's and gender history and gender and politics. Most recently (2016) she co-edited a book with Ayse Gül Altınay titled *Gendered Wars, Gendered Memories. Feminist Conversations on War, Genocide and Political Violence*. She is also the author of books on women in Hungarian politics in 1945–1951 (Petö 2003a), biography of Julia Rajk (Petö 2007), and, with Ildikó Barna, *Political Justice in Budapest after WWII* (Barna, Petö 2015).

Jitka Gelnarová: The current issue of *Gender and Research* is dedicated to the political agency of women in history. I would therefore like to focus particularly on your research on women involved in the Arrow Cross Party (a Hungarian Nazi party) and as perpetrators of war crimes. Would you give us some more details as to when and how you came to be interested in this subject? Also, what obstacles did you encounter in your research?

Andrea Petö: I did write a book based on interviews with conservative and far-right women in contemporary politics in 2003 (Petö 2003b), about how they entered politics and what their expectations were. During these interviews I found that the discourses and ideas of the pre-1945 were coming back. After the long period of communism, which was ruthlessly fighting for a hegemonic discourse, I was in-

terested in how this continuity of a subculture was possible. That prompted me to work on political radicalism before WWII: The greatest obstacle was related to the issue of visibility. Female perpetrators' historiographic invisibility can be found in the trajectory of perpetrator research itself. Holocaust-related perpetrator research started in the second half of the 1990s, and for a long time solely focused on men. Following the logic of the Nazi state's activities, research represented perpetrators either as psychopaths or as banal bureaucrats. Primarily as a result of the debate surrounding Goldhagen's book (Goldhagen 1996), which argued for a nuanced scientific inquiry devoid of stereotypes, research has finally turned towards the issue of ideological commitment, and, therefore, towards the intellectual elites that provided the intellectual background of the Holocaust. Perpetrator research gained further relevance when the children of famous and well-known Nazis published their books one after another. But the real step in the right direction was when research began on how someone from the 'everyday' level of the common people becomes a perpetrator, and how the memory of perpetrators evolves on the individual level. Finding sources about the activity of common people in a turbulent historical period was a real challenge.

Jitka Gelnarová: The involvement of women in the Arrow Cross Party was disproportionately high (relative to their overall degree of participation in politics in the inter-war period (Petö 2014). Nonetheless, we know much less about them than about the men. In this connection, you refer to a representation deficit (Petö 2016a). In one of your interviews you mention that your objective is 'to elevate them from oblivion' (Petö 2016b). Rendering invisible women 'present' in some sense is a fundamental objective of the history of women. However, this endeavour is for the most part associated with positive heroines – models that we could emulate. Why is it important that feminist historians deal with women who were perpetrators of war crimes? Why is it so important to make them visible?

Andrea Petö: Women in far-right politics represent a real challenge for feminist research. First because you mostly

choose to work on women whom you admire and you think that your work will contribute to constructing feminist genealogies. That was the case when I wrote the biography of Julia Rajk (Petö 2007). Walter Benjamin famously wrote that the strength of the extreme right is always due to the weakness of progressive politics. It was the same in inter-war Europe, when after getting the right to vote most women turned towards conservative and far right parties. As far as gender political mobilisation is concerned, the massive attraction of women to the emerging extreme right-wing parties and movements was a new phenomenon in Europe after WWI. The shift from liberalism requires historical research as we are also experiencing today how women are becoming not only supporters of illiberal regimes but they give their face to extreme right-wing parties and movements disseminating hate and exclusion. When analysing these movements we also need to be self-critical: what were the mistakes that led to the rise of women's participation in these movements? In the case of the Arrow Cross Party, among members in some districts 30% were women. In the current Hungarian Parliament women constitute 9% of the MPs. We have to ask painful and relevant questions about different forms of anti-modernist emancipation. Partly because it helps to reconceptualise one of the key themes in feminist research: gender and power. Women's power can be born in a situation where allegedly there is no women's power, because that lack of power creates power. This explains why so many women joined parties that celebrated dominant forms of masculine power. In the case of *Croix de feu*, the far-right organisation of French WWI veterans that was founded to restore masculine values questioned by the war, women utilised their professional background, and their network tied to the Catholic Church, to construct their own political agenda. As part of the dominant group, even women – the relatively and not absolutely weaker partners – also get their share. No matter that the political discourse is constructing a dichotomy about 'strong men' and 'weak women', women could still benefit from this political discourse. Applying their subordinate position, they could become political actors.

Jitka Gelnarová: Could you tell us more about the sources on women perpetrators in Hungary? What sources do you draw on? Where and in what state of preservation are they to be found? Have they been catalogued or digitised? Do we encounter the aforementioned representation deficit at the level of the sources themselves – in the very manner in which they are stored and processed? Do you find that the women have been made invisible already by this stage?

Andrea Petö: I had spent long years in the archives researching the people's tribunals' trials. A project from these years spent in the archives is the book we wrote with Ildikó Barna *The Political Justice of Post Second World War Budapest* published by CEU Press (Barna, Petö 2015). This was the ju-

risdictional institution, which between 1945 and 1949 performed the investigation of war crimes committed in Hungary. As in all other European countries, serving justice in Hungary after the war was an urgent task, and its unfolding was determined by political processes. For my work on women perpetrators, I was looking for women war criminals among the people's tribunals' trial documents, as well as in the contemporary press. I also looked at the testimonies of survivors in the different archives including the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (VHA). As far as general criticism regarding the collection is concerned, I partly agree with the comment by Annette Wieviorka (2006), who blames the collection for the 'Americanisation of the Holocaust', and claims that the massive collection of interviews resulted in nothing else but myriads of 'authentic' witness stories. However, her views can be criticised on both political and methodological grounds. The political grounds for the first criticism are based on the understanding that the more survivors stories collected, the greater the possibility there is to combat anti-Semitism and racism. Had the Shoah Foundation not collected these stories, they would have been lost forever. The interviews made with survivors will make a difference in the future as far as the politics of memory is concerned. The methodological criticism tackles the question of what we can do with this massive digital archive that has already been created. It would be a mistake to dismiss it as an unprofessionally collected, mass, 'Americanised' collection, the way Wieviorka does. Rather, I argue that scholarship should strive to understand the peculiarities of this collection given by its digital format. Therefore, I am interested in the narrative framework used by the survivors: how do they talk in the interviews they gave for the VHA? I was curious about how survivors were narrating their own participation in the events in their testimonies. From the interviews we get to know how masculinities and femininities are being performed. The indexing of this digital archive is also not without problems. After I started using the Visual History Archive to teach the course 'Gendering the Holocaust' it became obvious that not only does the archive not use the key word 'rape', but it also fails to recognise sexual assault told in the stories, as the interviewers were not instructed to pay attention to these stories. Therefore, these digital testimonies are creating a special version of the events that happened. The good news is that due to constant pleas from our students the archive recently introduced the indexing term 'rape' in the collection.

Jitka Gelnarová: You refer to a 'conspiracy of silence' in connection with the historical memory of rapes committed by Red Army soldiers in Hungary (Petö 2012). Could you tell us more about the mechanism involved?

Andrea Petö: Researching wartime rape is exceptionally difficult because the phenomenon is surrounded by a 'conspiracy of silence'. The silence has also been reinforced by

practically everyone involved, be it the perpetrators, the rape victims, or witnesses, as they all share an interest in keeping what has happened silenced. The wartime rape cases that we hear about should be handled with some methodological precaution. In recent mainstream literature the definition of rape has also noticeably shifted from being an exceptional occurrence solely linked to the deviance of a single perpetrator.

Jitka Gelnarová: How is the fascist period in Hungarian history perceived within contemporary Hungarian society? How is it portrayed in public discourse, and in family narratives? And in what roles do women feature here?

Andrea Pető: I would like to use the concept of non-remembering when talking about interwar Hungary. I am using the concept of non-remembering as a conscious process of forgetting and also a process of substituting painful 'hot memories' with cold, less painful memories. In the Hungarian 'Holocaust70' commemorations, the 'non-remembering' happened in a way that it did not lead to the construction of 'dialogic remembering' to use Assmann's term (Assmann 2006), but promoted the further pillarisation of different memory cultures present in Hungary. The memories that have been transmitted mostly within the family are conflicting. Just take the example of the monument of the German Occupation on Liberty Square in Budapest, which sought to create an alternative narrative to the previous anti-fascist discourse. The framework for story-telling has been determined by the paradigm of the Veritas (Truth) Historical Research Institute, which was recently established by the Christian-conservative government. For this institute, the task is to research the 'truth'. Paradoxically, the civic organisations, historians, and Jewish organisations that have rallied against the Veritas Institute have defined their primary task as formulating and sustaining a 'counter-truth', rather than analysing the factors that go beyond the true/false binary. As long as the discussion is limited to the concept of 'truth' the construction of a counter-canon is possible, one that necessarily excludes certain groups, such as women.

Jitka Gelnarová: When it comes to political extremism, the autonomy of women as political agents is often doubted. You have demonstrated that something similar happened in the post-WWII legal trials, where doubt was cast on the autonomy of women as perpetrators. You have written that often their punishments were made lighter on the grounds that they acted under the influence of, or pressure from, others (Pető 2012). Did those women regard themselves as autonomous agents? Are there any sources that could enable us to establish this one way or the other?

Andrea Pető: Indeed, that was one of the key findings of the research – female defendants usually got a lighter sen-

tence if they indicated that they had been acting under the influence of their male relatives: husband, father, or brothers. The gender dynamics of the people's court is very interesting as they shed light on the changing gender regimes. A good example is Erzsébet Rátz. Narrative frames about Erzsébet Rátz, one of the very few Hungarian female political journalists before WWII, were revised dramatically twice during her lifetime. Erzsébet Rátz, as a student of archaeology, sent home from Italy the most enthusiastic letters praising Italian fascist achievements. These letters were published by the Nazi newspapers because her father, Jenő Rátz, was deputy Prime Minister of the government of quisling Sztójay. After the liberation of the country by the Red Army in 1945, as a 'fascist journalist' she was condemned to eight years of imprisonment, an exceptionally harsh sentence in 1946. During the trial, her journal articles and reports were used as evidence. According to the sentence handed down by the communist-dominated people's tribunal, she was punished for being engaged in the so-called 'unwomanly' activity of political journalism, and Rátz, being a woman, was unfit 'for the huge responsibility which is a part of political journalism'. This gender bias of the people's tribunal worked to her advantage later when she herself successfully petitioned for her rehabilitation, after the collapse of communism, in 1994. There she claimed that as a woman she could only repeat and re-edit what others had already said: it was not her own opinion, because being a woman, she could not possibly have an 'opinion of her own', and therefore her trial in 1946 had been a show trial. The people's tribunal, as well as the rehabilitation process after 1989, also served as a corrective force to restructure the gender hierarchy: after World War II she was punished as a politically active woman, as a Nazi and as a 'class enemy', and after the collapse of communism, in 1994, she was celebrated as a 'passive' woman and at the same time as a victim of communism. On the other hand, if you investigate the activity of Erzsébet Rátz herself, then you see that she was very much an agent of her life regardless of the fact that the gendered narrative frameworks about the same event have changed.

Jitka Gelnarová: Throughout history women speaking from the rostrum often emphasise that in taking a political stand they speak as 'mothers'. To what extent are we to regard this as the strategy women use to establish themselves in a male-dominated environment? In considering the 'mothers argument' primarily as a strategy, are we not in danger of reproducing the image of these women as mere puppets?

Andrea Pető: Maternal feminism, mobilising women as mothers, is one of the challenges of feminist scholarship. Let's look at the example of the women's demonstration in Budapest on 4 December 1956 – a month after the Soviet invasion men organised women to demonstrate on the

streets as 'Hungarian Mothers'. Tens of thousands of women showed up in Hero's Square. Should we dismiss this demonstration the same way it has been omitted from all types (leftist, liberal, conservative) of historical canons on the 1956 Revolution? Rather I would suggest investigating the anti-militarist tradition from a gendered perspective and analysing different forms of protests critically.

Jitka Gelnarová: At the present time also, women of the current far right are perceived as mere pendants of male politicians. You disagree with this perception, maintaining that we ought not to regard them as mere puppets. In your view, they are 'agents of change' and 'the advocates of an anti-modernist emancipation' (Petö 2016b). Could you explain what exactly you mean by the term 'anti-modernist emancipation'? What does emancipation signify in this context? Parties of the extreme right tend to see a woman's place as primarily in the family. Yet those women want to be politically active; they want to stand on the political rostrum and speak from it. Is there not a paradox in this?

Andrea Petö: Extreme right-wing female politicians create rhetorical space for themselves in political protests and define 'well-being' as an anti-modernist utopia. It is anti-modernist because of a special temporality. These women advocate a new beginning independent from the modernist tradition. They conceptualise their political role as a civilising mission rooted in their fight against the impact of the 'anti-national' communist experiment of modernism. This attempt is based on the imagined tradition of pre-modernity, whereas they identify the modernity which brought women's suffrage with cosmopolitanism. The rhetoric of victorious neoconservative politics after 1989 left emancipatory leftist politics in a defensive position, as theirs is a defensive (protecting women) and negative rhetoric (fighting against discrimination). Because it is not critiquing neoliberal politics, it remains the prisoner of progress. Lisa Brush (Brush 1996) has called maternalism 'feminism for hard times'. Perhaps the rethinking of maternalism is the way out of the deadlock when the electoral support of traditional progressive parties is not growing, while social, economic problems are increasing.

Jitka Gelnarová: In the Czech Republic over the last year and a half, women have been playing a relatively major role in anti-refugee demonstrations, as both organisers and speakers. What is the situation like in Hungary in this respect?

Andrea Petö: The anti-refugee campaign, which concluded in a referendum in Hungary, is organised by men. Research shows women are mostly doing supporting and background work. This should not be underestimated as they are running ethnic businesses, publishing houses etc., but the branding of these movements has been connected with na-

tionalised masculinity. The appearance of women in this is only as the one who allegedly need to be protected from the influx of migrants, who are portrayed as potential rapists. The country was literally flooded with posters equating migrants with rapists. Playing the hate card did not work well, as the referendum was not valid, but in any case it managed to mobilise more than three million voters to show sympathy for the government. However, in 2015, at the peak of refugee crisis in Hungary, those who volunteered to fill in the gap in services that were expected to be provided by the state were mostly women. It is still typical that when unpaid and care work is expected you mostly see women doing that work.

Jitka Gelnarová: You also organise feminist historical walks in Budapest. Could you tell us a little more about those? What led you to this, and whom do you try to address?

Andrea Petö: I was invited to launch a book in Novi Sad in Serbia in the early 2000s. The women's studies centre had just issued a map of the city marking different places relevant to the history of the women of the multi-ethnic Novi Sad. While looking at the map I was wondering why there was no similar map of Budapest. I started to do research and it turned out that several women's studies centres have started alternative memory tours in reclaiming their city. From Bochum to Rome, from Cracow to Istanbul, women have started to map the city with stories. In the case of Budapest, my first book was about women's organisations between 1945 and 1951. The communist regime gradually banned these organisations. The police raided their offices and put all their documents in boxes and archived them in the basement of the Ministry of Interior. After 1989, when the documents there were made accessible, they of course started with the documents that they thought to be the most unproblematic: the documents of the banned women's organisations. I was the one who first opened those boxes and actually noted where these organisations had been operating for decades before the communists banned them. I used this inventory first to make a map of feminist Budapest. Later, I added the names of streets and squares named after women. This was not that difficult exercise as there are fewer and fewer female names. After 1989 the re-naming of public spaces affected those women who were connected to leftist political movements and their names had been erased. I also added public statues of women. It is very telling that the first public statue of a woman in Budapest, the statue of Johanna Bischitz, is still in the Hungarian Jewish Museum, as there has been no political power or will since 1989 to re-erect the statue, which was removed in the process of aryanisation. The tour I am organising visits spaces connected to women, including the present-day women's movements, the women's library, and queer clubs. The tours I am offering to my students at the CEU,

visitors, and also as a money-making enterprise with one of the companies working on city tours are always packed. I am truly enjoying my scholarly foray into public history.

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