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Families in Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy

(Some Notes on Hungary, with Special Regard to the  
Changing Role of Women)

One year after the spectacularly speedy and domino-like collapse of the communist rule all over East-Central Europe, the public dialogue (both, East and West) seems to show marked shifts of the presented issues and a great diversity of the concepts, analyses, evaluations and expectations. While the first reactions to the widespread revolutionary changes were generally driven by unconditioned and unanimous enthusiasm, genuine curiosity and surprise, the current debates seem to be more hesitating with regard to the present state, and even more, to the future chances of the region. While political analysts came to the fore to comment the actual events of the "year of wonder", the currently emerging need of a deeper understanding of the background forces leading to the recent changes can only be met by more comprehensive analysis, that should build on a synthesis of the approaches of the different social sciences. Those efforts have to be centered around the aim of giving a complex understanding of all those social, economic and political processes, that have been at work for long in the respective societies, much before the outbreak of open questioning of the regimes of "really existing socialism".

The search for satisfactory explanations of the hidden social processes of erosion has to raise a number of further questions on histories, values, attitudes and aspirations of the affected societies, and has to put them into the broader framework of European traditions and culture, being in a permanent clash with state-socialism in the East-Central European region. It is a challenging task for sociologists, social historians, economists and political scientists.

The present paper will, at best, attempt to give a modest contribution to the huge work ahead us. It will focus on some of the gender-related aspects of social history of Hungary in the past three decades, with the aim of pointing to some of the decisive crisis-phenomena of socialism in my country.

The choice of the perspective is not arbitrary. As I will attempt to show, women had a major contribution to the collapse of the former rule, that might be unfairly interpreted, if one takes into account only the classical "political" surface of party-formations, participation in governmental organizations, formal negotiations and decision-making. The very essence of the "peaceful revolution" of Hungary might be undiscovered this way.

The nationwide questioning of the socialist rule in Hungary, as I will argue below, has grown out of the wide "silent social struggle" against the totalitarian state throughout the three decades after the 1956 revolution. Families, as the only legitimate institutions outside the direct control of the state, had an outstanding role in shaping the society toward ends that were different of the

declared principles and regulating frames of the regime. Women were often in a key-position in organizing that non-articulated, non-classical, though massive social movement. Because of the hidden character of the struggle (the lack of classical formations and representations of political fights), however, women have often been blamed for their "political passivity" and "traditionalism", since they have always been underrepresented in the formal spheres of political life (in the organizations constructed and controlled by the party-state). I would like to challenge these frequently heard false conclusions by pointing to the peculiarities and more complex features of political struggles under the conditions of post-stalinist totalitarianism. The duality of the formal and informal society should be put into the focus of that reinterpretation of political life. The more "classical" forms of recent struggles for power between the old and the new social forces of the state versus civil society have evolved from that long history of hidden informal social movements, and cannot be fully understood without their antecedents.

There is a second reason, however, to put women's perspectives into the focus of the present analysis, driven also by the need of a meaningful dialogue about the future of East-Central Europe.

One often meets the worries, that the transition from a party-state ruled system to a market regulated one will lead to severe losses of previous security and stability. A frequent argument points to the former full employment of women and the accompanying social policy, that well might be

lost on a massive scale in the process of the desired changes toward marketization and parliamentary democracy. The actual facts seem not to confirm these arguments. Women (as well, as men) have had a longterm struggle to ease their "full employment" and have worked out alternative forms of ensuring security and stability outside the direct control of the state. Those efforts of creating self-protection against the exploitative and oppressive character of formal employment should be analysed in their coexistence with the acceptance of the rule of the party-state in making employment in the formal sphere compulsory. The outcome has been a delicate balance produced and reproduced day by day by both actors, i.e. as well by the totalitarian rulers as by their silent and seemingly "obedient" opponents. Therefore the whole notion of state-socialist full employment and the actual functions of state-delivered social policy have to be carefully revisited before articulating nostalgic claims for their preservation, that does not refer to people's experience, but might have dangerously conservative political implications. The potential losses and gains of giving up the former securities based on coercion and on the general lack of civil rights has to lead us to think about more suitable future alternatives. Their theoretical implications might also enrich the ongoing debate of the feminist literature on women's dependency either of men, or of the male-dominated state. The peculiar combination of patriarchy and independence, the subordination of individual needs for the sake of meeting more autonomous ones of the family-collective, belong to the experiences of women

in Hungary, that might well be evaluated, as serious compromises, but might also be looked at from the perspectives of women's grandiose contribution to the deliberation of the oppressed society. The latter perspective is the standpoint of the present writing. I do hope, that by choosing it, some important implications of the Hungarian case can be drawn for the struggles of women in the West, too.

#### Full employment under state-socialism - revisited

As it has already been indicated, the understanding of the longlasting silent struggle between the society and the socialist state has to be put into the framework of a thorough revision of the genuine political, ideological, economic and social objectives of state-regulated employment in the last four decades in Hungary. That revision is also necessiated by the fact, that the claim for equal access of women to gainful employment, as the main prerequisite of their meaningful emancipation, has century-long been a widely shared important tradition of the socialist movements. The unquestioned faith in the direct deliberating impact of (any forms and ways of) employment has contributed to a relatively late recognition of the need for serious refinement of the initial socialist concept, that has been realized in the second half of the twentieth century (in its most "perfect" way under state-socialism), but that has not concluded in the originally expected radical changes of social relations. It is therefore of crucial importance to ask: Has forced and compulsory

employment really led to an increase of the desired autonomy of women? Have the constraints of their lives been decreased and their choices increased this way? Or, does the history of coercive socialist employment tell us about the extension and generalization of direct political control over all citizens (both, men and women), that has more to do with oppression, than with deliberation and emancipation? Even with that reservation, how far can one speak of the modernizing impact of it? Have women gained or have they lost by taking up a similar rhythm and way of life to that of men?

Difficult and unsettled questions, that cannot be answered in any simple way. The most promising approach can probably be that of a historical analysis. Both, the achievements and failures of socialism can perhaps best be understood at the light of the overall social and political crisis, that the country had to face after the war.

Pre-war Hungary had a society divided by painful dualities of the coexistence and weak integration of a semi-feudal and a semi-capitalist social order. The economic structure and the weakness of the capitalist way of modernization has meant, that the urban-industrial part of the society has functioned according to more or less adequate European standards of the time. It had a modern division of labour, with the accompanying modern institutions of education, health, social services, system of social security, e.t.c., but seemed to be closed for the greater part of the society. The urban-industrial world did not offer an adequate market, nor an open way of promotion for about 50-60 per cent

of the population, namely to the land-based agricultural-rural society. Agricultural labourers, servants of the large latifundia, peasant smallholders and their families lived in extreme poverty, under the old rules of rigid estate-based structures, lacking any modern forms of social protection, facing high rates of unemployment and high risks of irreversible bankruptcy. They had to face the ever-lasting reproduction of uncertainties and crises on a massive scale. The pre-war urban-industrial economy was unable to absorb that huge agricultural reserve army, by offering stable paths for mobility, but it used it in a cyclical way, compromising by itself any efforts made by families to build up their longterm strategies of living. That slow, uncertain and controversial way of development has led to a desintegration of the social order, expressed in many aspects of material, social, political and moral disruption during the war.

Therefore the drives to construct stability, well-established bases of lasting social integration, finding new tracks of modernization and overcoming the disruptive factors of the pre-war system, have been goals enjoying massive popular support after the war. An economic policy centered around the rapid extension of employment was seen as the obvious way of creating adequate bases of living for each and every member of the society, and through that, of achieving rapid economic growth, social integration and a self-sustaining victory over poverty, as well. Thus the ideological-political goal of full employment had its foundation not only in Marxist theory, but it seemed to meet

the requirements of the one-time Hungarian reality and seemed to answer people's aspirations, too: it promised an exceptional concurrence of political, economic and social rationales.

The realization of the employment-centered economic policy was determined by the political character of the new regime, i.e. by the "victory" of communist totalitarianism in 1948. The totalitarian utopia aimed at solving all the above listed historical problems by integrating the citizens (better to say: subjects) under the all-embracing umbrella of the party-rule. According to its principles, all the goals of rapid modernization, maximum efficiency and a high degree of social equality could best be met by substituting the "chaos" of miriads of individual choices with the wisdom of centrally made irrevocable decisions of the party on "how and where to go". That philosophy was rooted in the conviction, that the "social good" will dissolve and harmonize the contrasting and short-sighted pursuits of the individuals by asserting the priority of the "all-societal rationality" with a never-seen concentration of power, decisions and control in the hands of the anonymous party-collective.

The realization of the utopia of "forceful enlightenment" required new fundamentals of power, a military-like rigid hierarchy of decision-making, exclusively from the top to the bottom, and new ways of permanent control over the everyday life of the society that had to move toward the derided ends. As it is well known, the new power-base was asserted first of all by the socialist way of nationalizing the means of



production and by rapidly eliminating practically all the forms of private property. The other objectives, i.e. those of one-way decision-making and the control over the perfect realization of the centrally decided ends were served by the radical reorganization of all the social institutions from the schools to the workplaces, from the governing of the technological processes of production to the collection and central re-allocation of all the material and manpower-resources of the society.

The rapid extension of employment based on compulsion has to be seen in this context. As it has been pointed out by many of its analysts, it neither represented the most rational way of increasing economic growth, nor the realization of formerly unmet pursuits and needs of the society. Its main and most important objective was to institutionalize the direct control over the daily activities and lives of the adult population in the gigantic and politically governed organizations of socialist production.

It follows from the priority of political goals over economic and social ones, that the rapid extension of employment was not rooted in the knowledge and skills reflecting the former structure of the economy. Instead, it deliberately wanted to surpass them by establishing previously non-existent forms of industrial mass-production, first of all, in heavy industry. The arbitrarily decided way of economic restructuring was built on the pre-assumption of a limitless number of formerly non-employed people, who could serve as an ample reserve army for any further extensions of

mass-production with regard to its manpower-needs. In concrete terms, the policy was based on the creation of more than 1.000000 new workplaces in industry between 1950 and 1970. The new industrial policy was planned mostly for huge masses of semi-skilled and unskilled labour, that was to be done by the former agricultural manpower, and, first of all, by women, who had worked hard in and around their peasant-households, but never have been "employed" in the modern sense of the word. It follows from the logic of the system, that it was repressive and hostile towards agriculture and towards any other forms of "traditional" households, too. It expressed its priorities in its discriminatory price-system as well, as heavy taxations and forced produce delivery put on the shoulders of all those, who resisted to take up the prescribed forms of "socialist" employment in industry. The punitive elements of the totalitarian program were combined with a number of administrative directives of ensuring the flow of capital and labour toward the prioritized social activities in an extremely forceful way, effectively destroying all the forms and frames of "non-socialist" aspects of life.

Two elements of the policy should be analysed here in somewhat more detail. The first one is the "earning-incentive" built on a new definition of the content and the level of wages and salaries, that has served as an "automatic guarantee" of making the socialist form of employment the one and only way of full social membership even in the later decades of more liberalized and less punitive working of the system. The second important aspect (closely related to the

first one) was the new definition, that has been given to the notion of social policy in a system, that regarded itself identical with the social good, thus deliberately terminated all the legally established forms and institutions of civil rights, and transcended them by the "superiority" of centrally defined political goals.

According to the "socialist" concept of detailed central planning of all the processes of resource allocation, production, distribution and consumption, money was thought not to play a great part in the regulation of the economy. The economic considerations on substituting cash-flow with the centrally administered direct delivery in kind were imbued with the ideological commitment to equality and the abolition of the old class-differences, and have been reflected in the arbitrary construction of both, the price-system and the new definition of wages, too.

After the hyper-inflation destroying the economy in 1944-45, a new currency was introduced in 1946. Parallel with its introduction, the purchasing power of wages and salaries was centrally defined at a level being equivalent to about one-third of their pre-war counterparts, while the range of them was sharply reduced. By that means, the new regime created a longlasting source of high rate of accumulation in the hands of the central state agents, and a more or less automatic "incentive" of seeking employment, too. The mere economic pressure of survival (in its very profound sense) has pushed all adult members of the families to take up full-time jobs in the socialist firms, since even the so-called good

wages of qualified male workers turned out to be severely inadequate to cover the costs of a modest standard of living of a family.

This way employment rates have been successfully extended really within an extremely short period. The ratio of those of the adult population, who have been employed for at least 10 years in full-time jobs during their life has risen from 63 per cent in 1949 to 88 per cent by 1980. Data on women are perhaps even more telling: the traditional figure of the housewife devoting herself to work in and around the household has practically disappeared. While the ratio of them was about 60 per cent among women aged 15-54 in 1949, it dropped to 8 per cent by 1984.

One of the legitimising arguments of levelling down personal earnings was the new responsibility of the socialist state to deliver a number of services free of charge (or much below market-prices) and to establish a new system of social security exclusively for those, who take up gainful employment in the socialist spheres of the national economy. Therefore prices of education, health service, housing, transportation e.t.c. have not been "built in" into personal disposable incomes. At the same time, the forms of delivery were monopolised by the state. This way people had no other choice, than to become socialist employees. Not only, because they had no resources to buy those services on the market, but because the market itself has also disappeared. This way the entrance to the socialist labour force was not merely a financial issue, but a matter of social membership, too. Eligibility-

rights based on citizenship were substituted by ones based on having regular and continuous employment, and that was the only way of getting access to basic services like childcare, medical care, not to speak of family allowances, sick-benefits or pensions. Even the right to apply for a passport was attached to a certificate, that one could not get anywhere else, but at his/her workplace (or schools or other officially acceptable institutions.)

This way all the aspects of life became institutionalized and taken out of personal control within a short time. The daily rhythm of family-life had to be adjusted to the rigid and alien regulations of the huge socialist organizations, that followed the logic of industrial assembly-lines. The space and scope of privacy has practically disappeared. Any open attempts to resist the new rules of overall "collectivism" were followed by serious political attack, blaming people with "petit burgeoise traditionalism" and shortsightedness. The institution of the family was seen as the remnant of conservatism. Even its capability of bringing up and educating children was seriously questioned: the "ideal socialist human beings" were expected to subordinate their individual taste, aspirations and motivations to the supremacy of "collective", the latter being understood, as the unconditioned acceptance of the uniformity of mass-behaviour.

The classical principles and measures of totalitarianism could not be maintained in their initial rigidity in Hungary for a very long time. The 1956 revolution brought about an end of an era, that never could be restored in its old forms. The

30 years of Kadarism, that followed, have led to a gradual departure from the classical communist rules and values, giving way to alternative forms of modernization and social participation.

The 1956 revolution: a key to the erosion of communism in  
Hungary

The revolution of 1956 was the first, and, until recently, the only radical grass-roots critique of and a real threat to the totalitarian way of communist ruling, claiming basic human rights of freedom of the individual for controlling his/her own life, and revitalizing fundamental values of the European civilization for national independence, democracy and autonomy. The unanimous nationwide refusal of any forms of "blissful" oppression in the name of sanctified goals of the "collective" was unquestionable.

Although the shockingly brief and temporary victory of the civil society was defeated after two weeks, and the basic frames of the totalitarian reign were successfully reconstructed by joint Hungarian and Soviet military efforts, the messages of the revolution could never be forgotten. The status quo of the pre-1956 period could never be fully reproduced anymore.

The lessons drawn from the revolution have become the point of departure and the most important (though contradictorily interpreted) collective experience of both, the rulers and the ruled. The relative political stability of

Kadarism and the actual content of its politics lied in the fragile compromise that somehow had to be worked out between the full (though less coercive) restoration of the classical rules of the totalitarian regime and the partial "rehabilitation" of the rights of the individual for a minimum of privacy and "free" choice.

That space of "permitting" a limited scope of individual decision and action should be clearly distinguished from civil rights: the latter is guaranteed by law and by a number of institutions of the civil society. The former is a matter of political goodwill of those in power and of sufficient obedience of the powerless in accepting the principal rules of the game.

Nevertheless, the actual content of that compromise has been a tacit acceptance, even a gradual expansion of the space for individual autonomy, that turned out to be enough for grandiose performances of the society even within the maintenance of the given structure.

The deeper sociological explanation has to be found in the fact, that those restricted grounds of autonomy have become the bases, that the Kadarist policy unintendedly re-opened for the realization of the already mentioned unfinished and interrupted embourgeoisement process of the pre-war period, without giving up the basic features of the totalitarian character of the power-structure and the political order. It is important to emphasize, that the consolidation of the sixties has not led to fundamental changes in the principal functioning of "socialism". The



centralization of power, its property-bases given by the domination of anonymous (party)state ownership, the paramilitary way of administering economic and social life exclusively from the top to the bottom, the direct intervention into the everyday working of production and distribution e.t.c. have remained practically unchanged and have continuously determined the scope of "independent" institutional actions as well, as all the basic frames of the lives of the individuals.

The innovation and the key of the success lied elsewhere, namely in the rehabilitation of the family.

It turned out, that given the deeply rooted motivations of material, cultural and symbolic pursuits of "Europeanism" in broad layers of the Hungarian society, significant social groups were able to combine their participation in the formal institutions with working out alternative paths for promotion and social mobility, based on their restricted autonomy in the informal society.

The gradual development of the so-called second economy embracing cca 75 per cent of the households at present, was rooted in the productive use of time in the family-economy on top of the work people had to performe in their official workplaces. The rigidity of the organization of socialist production, the scope of shiftwork and regular compulsory overwork necessiated by the cyclical malfunctions of the economy has not been reduced in the decades of Kadarist "liberalization". Nevertheless, the energy that the society was able to put into extra work for meeting self-determined



needs of the family by following self-defined rules and habits of the division of labour and roles, has led to admirable achievements.

The typical Hungarian families could establish a second stable source of income and an important pillar of self-protection by their regular agricultural production in the family-plots and gardens, contributing not only to a more sufficient level of their own consumption, but establishing a lasting forms of private accumulation, too.

The productive capacity of the second economy has also been shown in the nationwide movement of construction: hundreds of thousands of modern dwellings were built exclusively from the hard manual work and reciprocity-based division of labour of the informal networks of the communities; modern equipments were either constructed or bought, and a general modernization of the private way of life was reached through these huge efforts, that were at best tolerated, but not supported by the official measures of general social and economic policy. Nevertheless, the content and the standard of goods and services that a great number of the households rendered to its members despite the unfavourable conditions of smallscale labour-intensive production was often better in quality and more suitable to meet the needs of their consumers, than the ones available through the formal economy. Family-based services of childcare and care for the sick or the elderly were especially in a sharp contrast to their impoverished and humiliating counterparts in the inhumane, bureaucratically run and gigantic institutions of the state.

However, the performance of the families was grandious not only in material terms. Their modernising capacity can also be shown by the fact, that the "obedient" acceptance of the socialist forms of institutional education and care did not hinder the efficient transfer of alternative cultures, officially ignored values, orientations and elements of a knowledge that one could not learn in any formal organizations. The importance of the latter aspects of cultural transfer through the informal networks of kinship and through the loose relationships among workmates or neighbours has to be valued especially at the light of the crisis of the Kadarist regime: the unexpected speed and peacefulness of the present social and political transformations of the Hungarian society cannot be explained without the hidden continuity and at least partial accomplishment of the embourgeoisement process beneath the formal surface of socialism.

Therefore it is fair to say, that the families have become the real agents of modernization and adaptivity. Since all that happened in a permanent opposition to the officially declared rules and directives, their performance was seen by their members also in political terms. Families have been the embodiments of everything that was regarded to be chosen, autonomous and unofficial. That symbolics of it was conceived in a sharp contrast to all the formally dictated aspects of life and all the institutions, that were seen to express the alien will and the threat of defencelessness. In short: families became the institutions of political resistance, the highly appreciated backings of the ongoing silent social struggle for freedom, that has never been given up.

Women had a key-position in the maintenance of that quite unusual multifunctionality of the families. Given their traditional organising role within the home, they were aware of the quasi-political meaning of their activities. The source of pride laid more often in their achievements at home, than in the acknowledgement of their formal performances at their workplaces. And it did not reflect their traditionalism. They experienced tough subordination and massive exploitation in their work that was to "emancipate" them, while felt real liberation and protection in turning back to their homes.

True, the second shift accomplished in the households on top of the eight hours hard work in the factories or in the offices has put extra burden on the shoulders of women. Nevertheless, the concentration of time and the revitalization of energies in meeting the tasks of a good housewife has not been guided by the mere acceptance of the old patriarchal rules. It has equally been rooted in conscious decisions and deliberate value-choices of establishing and maintaining the self-respect of the family as a whole. The daily reproduction of the more or less traditional division of roles within the households between women as carers and men as producers has to be seen in the context of the above-described struggle against the dictated rules of uniformity and personal subordination in the outside world, that effectively could be countervailed by turning to the "old" sources of appreciation, filled much with reverse symbolics under the given conditions.

That combination of the patriarchic rules with a high degree of autonomy and self-defined standards of modernity can perhaps best be exemplified by the history of early childcare.

As it has been mentioned before, the extension of institutionalized forms of services for young children was mainly necessitated by the manpower-hunger of rapid industrialization, backed also by the anti-family ideologies of socialist education and forced collectivism. The way of delivering services in the large and overcrowded state-run creches and kindergardens followed the requirements of female employment, offering at best guard and a minimal fulfilment of basic needs. But they were inadapative to the highly intensive needs of their young users for personified care and intimate relations. Instead, their mass-regulations of rigidly defined time-tables of uniform daily activities have led to serious symptoms of hospitalization, massive regression in child-development, expressed in poor emotional and intellectual performance as well, as the frequent occurrence of various diseases. This way the take-up of the services was seen by the parents more as a lack of any alternative options, than the really desirable realization of their needs and ideas on childcare. It expressed defencelessness instead of rights in their eyes, leading to permanent frustration and guilty conscience especially on the part of the young working mothers.

The innovation of the Kadarist social policy by offering a new job-protected alternative of caring for babies in the form of the child care grant, though introduced mainly under

the pressure of a number of severe economic considerations in 1967, was seen as a great victory by women, who interpreted it as the rehabilitation of their rights for responsible motherhood. The new measure gave them the option for temporary withdrawal from employment in the first three years after childbirth. Entitlement for the benefit was defined on the grounds of previous full-time employment, following the earlier described general logic of social policy in state-socialism. Although the relatively low level of the benefit (defined at about 50 per cent of the average female earnings at the time of its introduction) has led to serious cuts of the family-budgets in a great number of the cases, its take-up at least for the first 12-18 months became a common rule within a few years. Later modifications of the regulations have even increased its popularity by permitting the cyclical combination of take-up and return to work several times during the period of entitlement, and also allowing some forms of part-time employment, while being at home with the child.

The direct and indirect impacts of these innovations were manifold. Let me briefly list just some of them.

The significantly raised standards of childcare should be mentioned at the first place. The generally better physical conditions and more suitable educational settings that could be established in the private homes, have gradually influenced the running of the state-delivered services, too. Given the potential of other alternatives, parents have gained relatively good "largaining position" in them. Thus the drive for modernity and more flexibility has been slowly penetrating

the official norms and values, too. The state-run creches and kindergardens have gradually given up their rigid refusal of any forms of parental participation. Instead, the ongoing negotiation between the "professional" and the "lay" carers of the child, the incorporation of parental contribution and work in the everyday running of the service, the joint pressure from below on rising the officially acknowledged standards became general, though previously unimagined features of the public sphere.

Achievements with regard to women's work are also worth for mentioning. The chronic manpower-shortage of the firms (being a general feature of the socialist economy, but especially intensive in spheres based on massive female employment) induced a significant degree of control over production on the part of the employees. Given the option for temporary withdrawal of young mothers, the otherwise poor assertion of women's rights in their workplaces could be extended in a quite meaningful way. More flexible working hours and a general improvement of the working conditions had to be introduced, and at least some hidden forms of previously non-existent part-time employment had to be incorporated.

This way the families became able to make profit from a more flexible combination of the activities of their members in the two coexistent economies, too. Women's work in the sphere of the formal economy became often regarded as just one necessary pillar of full social membership (in the above used sense); while their main contributions were executed in the agricultural and service-sectors of the second economy. Their

key-position as employees (in both spheres) gave them a high degree of independence and autonomy, though severely imbued with the previously described subordination and multysided defencelessness.

The conclusions that can be drawn are equally controversial. Though the main argument of the paper was to point to the grandious performance of the society with regard to establish modern standards of life, knowledge, values and aspirations under the severely unfavourable conditions of "really existing socialism", the longterm maintenance and further development of those achievements is highly uncertain in the present state of general crisis. The contribution of great masses of rank - and - file people to the gradual erorion and the final collapse of the old rule is unquestionable. However, the potential of their power over deciding the future tracks of development is unclear. The democratic frames of new politics have already been established. Though their filling with meaningful working is a long struggle ahead us.