

Dalma Feró<sup>1</sup>

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Orsolya Bajusz<sup>2</sup>

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Corvinus University, Budapest

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## PROGRESSIVIST GENDER-BASED ACTIVISM AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL ANTAGONISM IN HUNGARY THROUGH TWO CASE STUDIES<sup>3</sup>

### Progresivistički pristrasan rodni aktivizam kao sredstvo društvenog antagonizovanja u Mađarskoj: dve studije slučaja

*ABSTRACT: The endorsing of 'progressive' issues is embedded in the imaginary of the East-West slope. It is especially issues defined more in terms of recognition than redistribution and framed in terms of individual tolerance that have become emphatic signifiers of 'progress', 'Western'/'European' values, and thus the civilizational and moral hierarchy of the East-West slope. Aligning oneself with these issues (such as LGBT rights, liberal anti-racism, liberal feminism) on the periphery of Europe is a means of distinguishing oneself against the rest of the 'backward' country or region. As a strategy of raising one's social status it is a tool of social antagonism. We look at two case studies from Hungary to analyse how progressivist narratives are enmeshed in self-colonization. We conduct discourse analysis to examine how self-appointed advocates activate the West-East hierarchy as they claim to morally elevate society, and how this progressivist narrative feeds a populist mobilization that increasingly uses 'gender' as a symbol for corrupting foreign forces. We argue that representing social issues such as women's disadvantages as a matter of tolerance rather than as a deep-seated, structural, material issue serves as a mutual legitimating mechanism for the progressivist actors who accomplish it and the region's position in the global world order.*

**KEYWORDS:** East-West slope, moral geopolitics, self-colonization, progressivism, redistribution, recognition, homo-nationalism, vigilante citizens, spokespersons, virtue signalling

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1 fero.dalma@gmail.com

2 o.bajusz@gmail.com

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APSTRAKT: *Podržavanje “progresivnih” pitanja je ugrađeno u imaginaciju odnosa Istok-Zapad. To je posebno slučaj kada su te teme definisane više u u okviru priznavanja, nego raspodele i u okviru individualne tolerancije koja je postala nedvosmislen označitelj “progresu”, “Zapadnih/Evropskih” vrednosti, pa tako i civilizacijska i moralna hijerarhija odnosa Istok-Zapad. Usklađivanje sa ovim pitanjima (kao što su LGBT prava, liberalni antirasizam, liberalni feminizam) na periferiji Evrope je sredstvo za uspostavljanje vlastite različitosti u odnosu na ostatak stanovništva u “nazadnoj” zemlji ili regionu. Kao strategija podizanja vlastitog društvenog statusa to je sredstvo za stvaranje društvenog anatagonizma. Mi analiziramo dve studije slučaja u Mađarskoj da bismo videle kako su progresivističke naracije povezane sa samokolonizovanjem. Sprovodimo analizu diskursa da bismo ispitale kako samoprolašeni zastupnici aktiviraju hijerarhiju Zapad-Istok dok tvrde da moralno uzdižu društvo i kako ova progresivistička naracija hrani populističku mobilizaciju koja sve više koristi “rod” kao simbol za koruptivne zapadne sile. Mi tvrdimo da reprezentovanje društvenih pitanja, kao što je nepovoljan položaj žena, kao stvari tolerancije, a ne kao duboko ukorenjenog, strukturalnog, materijalnog pitanja, služi kao uzajamno legitimišući mehanizam, s jedne strane za progresivističke aktere koji ga zastupaju, a s druge strane za potvrdu položaja regiona u globalnom svetskom poretku.*

KLJUČNE REČI: odnos Istok-Zapad, moralna geopolitika, samokolonizacija, progresivizam, redistribucija, priznavanje, homonacionalizam, građanska samozaštita, glasnogovornici, signalizacija vrlina

## Spokespersons, Vigilantes, Virtue Signallers

The privileging of ‘progression towards the West’ is deeply embedded in Hungarian historical traditions, and it is a major influence for progressivist activism. In such activist projects, there are different strategies for creating legitimacy for oneself.

One salient strategy is speaking in the name of a marginalized group. There is nothing evident about the existence of spokespersons – without a certain kind of public sphere, and given modes of representation of interest there would be no spokespersons at all (Bourdieu, 2000: 184–186). According to Bourdieu, spokespersonship is not only dependent on the public sphere, but spokespersons both define the groups they claim to represent, and they themselves are defined through this relationship. For this reason, persons who represent (or just endorse) a cause that is deemed progressive will also come into public attention and can bask in the light of progress.<sup>4</sup>

This is even more evident in projects in which individuals position themselves with respect to ‘progress’ through using marginalized groups as the

4 If we follow Bourdieu’s *Pascalian Meditations*, systems of classification and the vision of the world as symbolic transcription of social relations would be the site of social antagonism, and the concept of the spokesperson is inherently tied to the theory of symbolic violence, then within the Hungarian context spokespersonship would formulate aligned to local meanings and struggles, such as progressivism in our case.

ground for their orientation towards the ‘West’. Böröcz gives a prime example, an open letter signed by Hungarian ‘leftliberal’ intellectuals in 2001, thanking France its long-standing goodness as evidenced by granting refugee status to Romani citizens of Hungary due to racist persecution in their home country. As Böröcz explores, the letter does not position the signatories in relation to the Romani people, it assumes no direct link between them, no responsibility or acting possibility on the part of the signatories. The marginalized group here serves an instrumental purpose: the signatories position themselves with respect to France (the ‘West’, ‘progress’) through them (Böröcz 2006: 114–115).

We use the expression of virtue signalling to describe such phenomena. The signalling of virtue is a concept derived from signalling theory and mainly used in a religious context.<sup>5</sup> Such theory concerns honest signals – signals with real virtue behind them. Yet virtue signalling is also becoming a common idiom in everyday use, defined as “the conspicuous expression of moral values done primarily with the intent of enhancing standing within a social group” by Wikipedia.<sup>6</sup> Angela Nagle (2017: 115–130) explores the economy of empty signals of virtue, instead of honest signals (should we stay with signalling theory vocabulary).

Just as spokespersonship is connected to social mobility, Nagle describes how if everyone signals the right kind of virtue, virtue is going to spread thin, and if people have no other currency (as often the case with millennials) scarcity has to be created, otherwise virtue would lose its value – therefore the stakes became higher and higher, and the condemning and targeting the non-virtuous comes to be more and more extreme and vicious (2017: 127–130).

Besides spokespersonship and virtue signalling, progressivist activism is also sometimes characterized by vigilantism (concerning the role within a broader social context). The notion of civic vigilance originates from the French revolution era, and it took a variety of forms: interventions by the press, associations, unions, petitions, strikes, etc, with the intent to evaluate and criticise the actions of the government (including public policy) by the governed (see Rosanvallon 2008: 38–40).

Many vigilantes oversee not merely state power but society and other citizens. Such conflating of boundaries fits within a broader neoliberal paradigm: as if there was no difference between institution and citizen, the public and the private sphere. Such unhinged vigilantes overseeing everyone and everything and doing it via the internet are commonly called netilantes or digilantes. For example Chang and Poon (2017) have researched netilantes in Hong Kong. The paper concluded that netilantes thought that the criminal justice system was ineffective; but they believed their actions would achieve social justice, which in turn gave them a boost of personal empowerment.

5 It was thoroughly explored by Joseph Bulbulia and Uffe Schjoedt (2010).

6 Such vernacular use of the concept is also found in academic papers, for example Azim Shariff et al (2017:694–696) suggest that people’s desire to virtue signal could be harnessed by the self-driving car industry or Paula Boddington (2016) even references James Bartholomew who claims to have invented the concept.

Watching individuals rather than institutions and social structures presumes that social problems can be solved by raising people's morale i.e. making them more tolerant and humane. Some activists thereby claim authority and legitimacy along the lines of values rather than by virtue of some form of area knowledge or deterritorialized knowledge. This is a rewarding strategy because by presenting social problems as originating from the deficiency of individuals rather than as deep-seated structural issues, questions about systemic problems can be avoided, as the following section expounds.

### **Recognition vs Redistribution in Progressivist Activism**

The discourse of social justice has changed significantly over the last decades. As Nancy Fraser has pointed out, the paradigm of redistribution, well suited to analysing claims concerning the relations of production and the distribution of resources, typified ideas of justice in the Fordist era. By the 1990s, however, the paradigm of recognition was fast becoming the dominant concept of social justice, focusing on the recognition of the distinctive perspectives of ethnic, racial, sexual, etc groups and the revaluation of their undervalued identities (Fraser 1995: 68–70, Fraser and Honneth 2003: 1–2).

The connection between distributive and recognition-based injustices has been largely neglected both practically and intellectually, to the extent that these two models have been predominantly presented as antitheses, Fraser remarks. Gender clearly defies this false antithesis: it is a class-like division, a basic organizing principle of the capitalist system that structures the fundamental division between paid 'productive' and unpaid 'reproductive' labour and the division within paid labour, and it is simultaneously a status differentiation which results in gender-specific forms of subordination including sexual abuse and domestic violence, exclusion from public spaces, objectification, demeaning stereotypes, etc. Fraser stresses that these two dimensions are causally interrelated, feeding each other, yet neither of them is an indirect effect of the other (Fraser 2003: 8–9, 19–22).

Whereas even seemingly one-dimensional social issues (like social class) have redistribution and recognition aspects, issues differ as to the extent they are ingrained in these two dimensions, she contends. The social division between women and men or between black and white Americans is grounded in the political economy and weighs heavily in both redistribution and recognition aspects, whereas homosexuals face recognition-rooted issues with contingent resulting redistributive harms. To account for these complexities, Fraser suggests an approach that accounts for the differentiation of redistribution and recognition and for the causal interactions between them (Ibid 22–26, 48).<sup>7</sup>

7 She critiques approaches that consider only one of the two dimensions legitimate or one reducible to the other (economism and culturalism) or treat these dimensions as two different spheres of justice that should be merely added together (substantive dualism). She suggests instead perspectival dualism, which facilitates an integrated view monitoring both the distributive implications of recognition reforms and the recognition implications of distributive reforms (Ibid 50–64).

Responding to the historical context, Fraser has been an astute critique of the dominance of recognition politics. As she points out, there are economic and social reasons behind this profound change in the conception of justice: the demise of communism, the surge of free-market ideology and the fundamentalist and progressive forms of identity politics are central to the decentring or even extinguishing of the claims for egalitarian redistribution (Ibid 7–8). Analyses differ on the extent that social movements have actively contributed to the development of neoliberalism or whether they were co-opted or institutionalized by it (see e.g. Jong and Kimm 2017). Fraser calls the US-born alliance of progressive forces and cognitive-cultural capitalism ‘progressive neoliberalism’, in which the former (maybe unwittingly) lend their charisma to the latter. In the absence of a genuine left, this mix has been opposed more and more strongly by a ‘reactionary populism’, as Donald Trump’s election and Brexit among others indicate (Brenner and Fraser 2017: 131–133).

Because of their different embeddedness in the political economy, some issues have more potential to be instrumentalised to legitimate neoliberal development than others. LGBT issues can be argued to have become more and more central within the human rights discourse of the past decades because they are grounded in recognition and are only circumstantially related to redistribution, so they dovetail with the logic of late capitalism more easily than recognition-focused forms of women’s or black people’s advocacy. Even within LGBT issues, there are newer topics that have recently come to the forefront. Transgender issues have been named as the cutting edge of human rights struggle especially since the legalization of same-sex marriage in all 50 states of the United States in 2015, but even some years prior to it.<sup>8</sup>

These processes have implications with respect to global relations. Progressive issues, imbued with the cultural logic of neoliberalism, have come to serve as

8 The topic has received increasing attention from many mainstream Western media. For instance, the May 2014 issue of *Time* featured the ‘Transgender tipping point’ as its cover story illustrated with a transgender actor and called the transgender movement America’s next civil rights frontier; Caitlyn (Bruce) Jenner was awarded ‘Woman of the Year’ by *Glamour Magazine* in 2015; and *National Geographic* published a special issue titled ‘Gender revolution’ in January 2017. According to the 2015 reports by *Funders for LGBTQ Issues*, funding for trans issues in the US increased steadily since 2003, and especially sharply since 2010. The past years also witnessed major legal changes in some Western countries e.g. gender identity and gender expression were added to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination in the Human Rights Act of Canada (Bill C-16), while a review to UK’s Gender Recognition Act is currently debated. Symbolic issues like transgender bathroom use have also received immense attention. North Carolina’s ‘bathroom bill’, which legislates that in government buildings people may only use bathrooms and changing facilities corresponding to the sex on their birth certificates has been met with boycotts by numerous companies and representatives of the entertainment industry. This issue was a great opportunity for big business, including porn companies like xHamster to turbocharge their reputation while conveniently turning a blind eye to or committing serious human rights violations. While the intricacies of the recent centrality of transgender issues needs further analysis, the fact that they do not only further divorce recognition from material issues, but are even based on the negation of materiality, e.g. anatomical sex can be argued to be a factor in it. See Mészáros (2017) for an analysis of the identity approach of LGBT activism in the EU context.

signifiers of the allegedly singular-universal path of progress, they have thus become instruments in marking out a global hierarchy of civilization vs backwardness. Due to the structural reasons mentioned above, LGBT rights discourses have become especially effective in undergirding imperial structures – a phenomenon that is referred to as homonationalism (see e.g. Puar 2007 and 2013, albeit she described this phenomenon in a different theoretical frame than we do).

We will see how the interlinking of linear progress with social issues plays out on Europe's periphery in the next section.

## What it Takes to Be Progressive on Europe's Periphery

Progressivist activism on the periphery of Europe has specificities shaped by the region's geopolitical context: it aligns with one of the two main elite strategies that have developed under the circumstances of the region's semi-peripheral position.

Eastern Europe was invented as a complementary concept to Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries when the ambiguous space that it had occupied was inserted into a scheme of civilization and backwardness, argues Larry Wolff. This took shape as the South-North polarization of the Renaissance gave way to the West-East hierarchy of the Enlightenment (Wolff 1994: 5–10). Eastern Europe's and especially the Balkans' position has been simultaneously included in and excluded from Europe: it occupies an intermediary, liminal, transitory position that is meant to mediate between Europe and the Orient, measuring the distance between civilization and backwardness (Ibid 7–13).<sup>9</sup>

The idea of progress this civilizational scale rests on is a teleological vision that appoints a contemporary case, the 'already advanced' as the direction of the change for the rest of the world, the 'not yet advanced'; Böröcz points out. This geopolitics is highly moralized: the world's fundamental moral hierarchy is produced through assigning moral qualities to specific geopolitical locations. It rests on the omission of historical knowledge (e.g. of colonialism), the fact that there is a causal connection between the advancement of some and the backwardness of others (Böröcz 2006: 116–132). The 'sliding scale of merit' of the East-West slope, if understood as a social imaginary, is not merely an accidentally false representation but a hegemonic worldview that is inherently linked to the hierarchical modern world system, writes Melegh (2006: 23–24). As such, it shapes our social reality and sets the terms and rules for different actors to position themselves, each other and their societies (Ibid 23, 189).

Alexander Kiossev expands on how this has played out on Europe's periphery. As lateral viewers of colonial processes, these cultures were incorporated into the hierarchical world stage as non-essential, incidental background of the setting.

9 Analyses differ on whether Eastern Europe is merely higher up on the hierarchy than the Orient (e.g. Wolff 1994: 7–13) or whether it constitutes the shadow, the despised alterego of Western Europe's incomplete self rather than its other as the Orient does (e.g. Todorova 1997: 15–18) The idea of Central Europe appeared as a further subdivision in the West-East hierarchy under specific political circumstances (see e.g. Todorova 1995).

Because they did not experience the brute force of colonization, they became less resistant to the ideologies, hierarchies and the symbolic invasion of the central powers. The all-encompassing processes of colonial globalization decentred them from their birth, driving them to perpetually struggle to catch up (or compete) with the colonial centre (Kiossev 2010).

Lateral cultures have hence produced two opposing but symmetrical and complementing self-colonizing narratives, Kiossev suggests. Westernization concurs with the hierarchies, false universalism and progressivism of the Enlightenment: it narrates history as a competition of 'civilizational achievements', and judges human value according to it. Nativism attempts (and fails) to reverse the adopted hierarchical relationship by uncovering the 'pure', 'authentic' national culture from the past and by aiming to preserve it from the further contamination of foreign influence, giving rise to ardent nationalisms (Kiossev 1999).

These two overarching forms of self-colonization, which have saturated Hungarian cultural and political traditions as well, are embedded in class interests, writes Farkas (2012: 169–171). On the one hand, Nativism strives to protect existing birth prerogatives against foreign-oriented rising classes with a reference to 'ancient' customs and statist traditions and by dividing the society into real and non-real Hungarians. Conversely, Westernizers have struggled to adjust the country to the prevailing political-economic-cultural centre in the name of 'progress' and 'development', condemning local specificities and nationalism and instead subordinating the country to the nationalisms of the dominant powers, which they interpret as universalism and internationalism. They have thus assisted foreign powers in taking economic advantage over the country and in striking down wars of independence for a share of return of their own. These two opposing narratives rely on each other: they legitimate themselves by pointing to the other as a source of threat (Ibid 169–170, 177–181).

The omission of this material interrelatedness (of different locations and actors on the slope) is the basis of the moral geopolitics of 'Western' goodness, as argued before. Activating this moral hierarchy thus serves to legitimate both the relations of the modern world system and the actors activating it. When the 'leftliberal' elite of the European periphery refers or appeals to the goodness of the 'West', they also gain a measure of 'progressive' moral goodness in this act of strategic self-positioning, writes Böröcz (2006: 115). This is often undertaken by assuming a civilizing missionary role to 'Westernize' local populations whom these elite groups position as lower down on the slope (Melegh 2006: 114). Since the regime change, human rights and equality discourse has become more and more central to these self-colonizing strategies (see e.g. Kováts 2016: 5–6), we can thus see similar alliances and counter-forces as those that Fraser referred to as progressive neoliberalism and reactionary populism in the U.S. context.

As we will show through two case studies from Hungary, progressivist activism in the region aligns with the Westernizing missionary strategy: its adherers commit themselves mostly to an agenda ready-made in the 'West', i.e. issues that have become markers of civilizational and moral progress (of the 'West').

## The Lowest Common Denominator: Channeling Away Anger and Dissatisfaction

The Facebook page *Nem tehetsz róla, tehetsz ellene (NTRTE)* ('You can't help it, you can do something about it') with its adjacent blog, *A nem az nem* ('No is no') was started in 2014 as a reaction to the videos of Baranya County Police blaming victims for sexual violence, which caused outrage countrywide. The page declared to stand against victim blaming creating a counter-video, which advocated chivalry to prevent sexual violence. The current<sup>10</sup> description of the page is a mix of fuzzy thoughts about sexual violence and its solution, proclamations like 'men are also human', and a statement that their field of vision has broadened as their audience has grown and therefore they no longer represent a sole issue, but rather a certain view or perspective, based on human dignity, solidarity, shared responsibility and thinking – so-called 'universal human values'.<sup>11</sup>

The majority of the content<sup>12</sup> they re-share with their own commentary is, accordingly, not related to the topic of sexual violence. There are posts about refugees, people with disabilities, politicians from far away countries, for example anti-Trump memes, everything Justin Trudeau (sometimes the page seems like a fandom for the 'progressive icon'), transgenderism, a friend looking for a wife, inspirational videos, and their own hashtag initiative to frame everyday life incidences (e.g. a woman rowing in a boat or a child playing with building blocks) as battles in a 'progressive' vs 'conservative' culture war. One of the page admins, Vera MÉRŐ, became an employee of Amnesty International Hungary since the first version of this text. Since then, *NTRTE* re-shares ample content from AIHu as well as its transgender blog with 'transsexual' cats and accolades to *Playboy's* progressivism for being 'trans-inclusive'.<sup>13</sup>

10 As of 15 February 2018

11 One of the authors of the video and the Facebook page (MÉRŐ Vera) came to be known with a book she wrote about the relationship between pornography and female sexuality. The book received negative criticism both for the absurdity of its research methodology and the lack of engagement with the relevant literature (e.g. Nóbik, 2012). The book's claim that the connection between pornography and sexual violence is unproven indeed shows a lack of comprehension of the subject. (There is ample empirical evidence to prove otherwise, for example the meta-analysis of Hald, Malamuth and Yuen (2010) shows that the conclusions from nonexperimental studies are fully consistent with those of their counterpart experimental studies – there is an overall significant positive association between pornography use and attitudes supporting violence against women.) This alone ignores the reality in a country where sex industry is widespread (as country of transit, destination, origin) and where cases of human trafficking connected to the sex industry are often featured in mainstream media. For figures see the "2016 Trafficking in Persons Report" of the US State Department.

12 We analysed their content between 2017 April and 2015 January. We did brief qualitative study, based on content and discourse analysis.

13 The 'transsexual' cat was called transsexual because its owner misrecognized its sex for years. In another post, a woman-identified male celebrated *Playboy* for having a transgender person on its cover, and demanded that he should be objectified just like a 'cis' woman otherwise he does not feel accepted as a woman (literal translation: full-value woman).

When it comes to representing ‘cases’, the page often shows anomalies, bizarre and extraordinary occurrences as if they were representative. For example, on Women’s Day 2017 an article was shared about (alleged) sperm-thieving women as a ‘dramatic’ example of ‘violence against men’. Through representing ‘cases’ and often anomalies, the authors of the page attempt to look very thorough, as if juxtaposing all these ‘cases’ and stories together under the umbrella of mottos such as ‘violence is never okay’ and ‘the victim is never responsible’ will eventually lead to something universally meaningful. This approach glosses over the fact that violence against women is not only the product of a certain mode of social organisation but also a tool in perpetuating these structures.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding the legitimacy for representing these issues, the main strategy is affective involvement, also an opportunity for the page’s authors to claim the universal validity of their own subjectivities, views and agendas and to promote themselves. For instance, Mérő describes in detail how a bus crash made her cry<sup>15</sup>, or when visiting the court proceedings of a domestic violence case (local feminist NGO ‘courtroom monitoring’ volunteers have been doing this for a long time) she had to post her (admittedly illegible) handwritten notes, just short of a selfie, in order to insert herself into the narrative of the highly publicized case.

By this logic, the page confers authority on itself to exercise censorship and adjudicate in matters of ‘humaneness’. Long-winded polemics about ‘humanity’ and ‘humaneness’ are a regular feature, for example they declare that ‘paedophiles can be human as well’ when it comes to sharing an article about plastic sex dolls designed for paedophiles. Sometimes they act as arbiters making allegedly ‘objective and subtle’ choices between opposing parties.<sup>16</sup> In other cases, they contrast what they see as divergent values, good and evil. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences is chastised for its toilet icon, which is juxtaposed with the supposedly progressive unisex, wheelchair-accessible toilet sign shared by Miley Cyrus.

The page frequently displays moral outrage at ‘problematic’ occurrences the page admins or its readers encounter, some of which turn into online bullying as in the case of a festival’s allegedly sexist advertisement. At the same time, Nike and Vodafone advertisements are celebrated as tear-jerkingly profound works of art: a Nike ad was in fact nominated to be ‘one of the most important art pieces of the century’. Through such means, the page becomes the perfect local replicator of the discourse of multinational corporations seeking to access the markets of the semi-periphery and whitewash themselves with the symbolic representation of ‘progressive’ agendas.

14 For an in-depth analysis of the connection between gendered violence and the economic order see e.g. Maria Mies (1986) and Silvia Federici (2002).

15 Gagyí and Pulay (2017) describe similar spokesperson strategies, but in a Bucharest ghetto: for example how NGO workers at conferences describe in vivid details how they were moved to tears by what they say when visiting the ghetto.

16 For example, during the protests in Budapest in 2017 against the intended closure of the Central European University, two activists threw paint at the president’s residence and were prosecuted. Taking up the position of a supreme authority, *NTRTE* scolded both parties, stating that throwing paint at the building was ‘helluva wrong’, but that leading them handcuffed on a leash was a ‘blood-boiling atrocity’.

The page does not care to propagate any kind of already established knowledge about sexual violence, they act like they are pioneers in dealing with the topic in an unbiased way. They always return to a bottom line in which it is a question of bad people doing bad things. The solution they propose is obvious – to follow a reliable moral compass such as them, relying in turn on the wisdom of corporate inspirational media, Western politicians, clickbait media such as Buzzfeed, Upworthy, and so on. They attempt to channel any passing surge of outrage into their own framework, so that besides basing their authority on the ideals of the ‘progressive West’, they can even claim to have a kind of populist base.

Within the discourse replicated by *NRTE*, minor artefacts such as a pillow or socks featuring slogans like “you can’t say no” have the potential to offend, as if sexism was some substance emanating from signs and representations, but the whole apparatus of the sex industry gets not only a free pass, but promotion – just as within a broader liberal discourse the sex industry is still about freedom of expression and sexuality itself (Dines 2010), similarly to how such discourses conflate freedom with freedom of expression with self-expression and individuality (core values of liberal subjecthood) itself.

### **Context as ‘Exceptionalism’: An Extreme Form of Universalism**

Another example of progressivist activism in Hungary is a network of overlapping activist groups, with a large part of their membership made up of the alumni/students of the Central European University, most of them foreigners. This network is not well informed about the local public discourse and the problems it thematises (most of them do not speak Hungarian), and thus they lay claim to representing cases on account of applying agendas and principles they deem to be universal. They use a globalized activist toolkit independent of any local context, which they apparently do not seek to get to know.<sup>17</sup>

They fail to address the broader public not only because they do not know local matters, but they even regard them as a source of threat, uninitiated to their progressive principles. For this reason most of their actions are addressed to a very limited audience. Even the address of their ‘community space’ (‘Klit’) closed by now used to be privy due to supposed security concerns. Their ‘feminist self-defence trainings’ came with a long list of forbidden (‘oppressive’) expressions and gestures, with strictly just vegan food allowed.

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17 A demonstration that was an important step in the formation of this activist network was organized in April 2010, protesting against an exhibition centring on ‘innovations for women’ on the occasion of Women’s Day. One of the organizers, a Hungarian member of the network gave a video interview to liberal news portal *Index*, saying in a very condescending manner that hardly any Hungarians came to their protest. At one point in the interview she asked herself in English ‘what’s power?’ (meaning how is the word power in Hungarian as she apparently could not recollect it). The video, especially its ‘what’s power’ moment became viral, many expressed anger online at how these progressivist activists weaponize the idea of gender equality against the local context.

Among the many overlapping groups/projects, the most visible one is Rhythms of Resistance (RoR), the local branch of a network of percussion bands that play at demonstrations and protests. The RoR movement was originally started in London, and as the Budapest branch explains, they got the know-how from the Vienna branch. Besides playing percussion sometimes they organise protests too.

In 2017 RoR organised the local adaptation of the worldwide Women's Day March. Initially it was co-organised with a local liberal feminist organisation who later withdrew due to ideological differences, among them RoR's undebatable pro-prostitution stance. The event description was originally published in English and later translated to Hungarian. The translation was riddled with grammar and vocabulary errors – interpreting the agendas imported from the economic centre failed even on linguistic level. Their failure to engage with the local context was at such extent that they did not even comprehend whether their slogans make any sense within a Hungarian framework. For example, some protesters had 'Black lives matter' and 'Indigenous lives matter' protest signs despite Hungary having neither a sizable black minority nor a colonial past, and 'indigenous' in a Hungarian context is either unintelligible or right-wing anti-immigration rhetoric.

In their video statement featured on *Al Jazeera*, their first priority was to stand against transphobia and for sex worker rights. These issues are not only completely alien to the lived reality of most Hungarian women, but are also based on an agenda that decontextualizes choice and identity in an extremely recognition-focused framework. According to the event description, they marched first and foremost against racism, borders, fascism, and transphobia. Violence against women was the last thing mentioned in both the *Al Jazeera* video and the event description.

Their lack of knowledge about local matters was criticised from not only the right but also the left of the political spectrum. The organisers' answer was that these critics come from the perspective of so-called 'Hungarian exceptionalism'. 'Hungarian exceptionalism' is a non-existent concept in social theory, it is modelled on US exceptionalism as if replacing a word in it would be enough to understand Hungarian society. Despite speaking to international mass media and organising public events, they denied to represent anyone, let alone Hungarian women. (The video itself seems more like it was made for the international than for the Hungarian public.) We can assume they would not dare to do this to women from postcolonial countries – to speak over their heads following universalist principles without adequate knowledge of local historical specificities. Yet while the colonial past is part of the social justice discourse of core countries, the imperial practices performed with respect to Europe's periphery are completely absent from it<sup>18</sup>, therefore it is easy to brand the Hungarian criticism of Western universalism as nationalism.

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18 As Böröcz (2001: 34–35) argues, there is a lack of reflection on these practices in Western European countries not in spite of but because of the absence of a colonial past.

This Women's Day march provided the Hungarian right with an ample opportunity to forge their own political capital. Hungarian 'anti-gender' mobilizing (see Kováts, 2018) gained momentum in last February and March when the right-leaning media, among them publications controlled by the government started to report that one of the largest universities in Hungary opens a gender studies department. Some right-wing politicians also wanted to stop the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by reasoning that it is the Trojan horse of 'gender ideology'. RoR's march was a great opportunity for the right-wing to parade their 'gender ideology' theories. Some of the agendas (decontextualising identity and choice in an individualist framework) promoted by the march's organizers indeed serve the needs of global capital, but these organisers have neither the resources nor the skills the right-wing adversaries of 'gender ideology' attribute to them. The significance of this march organized by a handful of people comes from right-wing political actors finding it significant. Obviously the problem with the march is not that they propagate issues opposed by the right-wing, but that their framework is hinged on the supremacy of the economic core countries, whose symbolic agendas they adapt and then represent without any critical reflection as if it was left-wing anarchist feminist activism.

What we can see here is a dichotomy that is not unlike what Fraser referred to as progressive neoliberalism clashing with reactionary populism. In Hungary, this dichotomy is embedded in the opposition of Westernizing and Nativist self-colonization. This type of activism does not only reinforce but even deepens the dichotomy of progressive Westernizing neoliberalism hailing Western universalism as redemption and guarantee for women's emancipation on the one hand and reactionary Nativist populism rejecting any 'foreign' influence on the other. Thus it makes it even harder to gain a foothold outside this framework.<sup>19</sup>

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19 Some of the members of this activist network wrote a response to our article on *OpenDemocracy*. They wrote under the pseudonym 'Gender ideologists', which makes it clear that they do not understand the political space that shapes narratives of gender, since this gesture, even if meant to be ironic, gives legitimacy to the right-wing accusations of gender ideology (on 'gender ideology' see Kováts 2018). With their title 'We are not your case study' they claim the right to be immune from analysis and criticism. Our commentary about their lack of contextual knowledge and their (self)colonizing strategies is equally lost on them. One prime example is that they talk about the so-called prison industrial complex, which is a U.S. systemic issue that in this way is not applicable to Hungary. Another example is that they misinterpret our differentiation between the Hungarian and the US context as positions in a scale of oppression – they go as far as portraying Hungary as a colonizing nation so that they can shift our analytical framework to their victimhood-fetishizing approach that only sees victims and oppressors. They also keep referring to a list of oppressed identities that pop up in Western liberal media, which serves the purpose of constructing for themselves a position from which they oversee and fight all forms of evil. In short, the article repeats exactly the same discourse that we critique, yet it attempts to divert a materialist analysis back to a moralizing framework in which the issues defined as 'progressive' in Western progressive neoliberalism are considered to hold universal validity.

## The Corollary of Progressivist Activism: Reproduction of Dichotomies

There seems to be a big difference on the level of rhetoric between the two case studies: the way they relate to global financial capital. The organizers of the Women's Day march claim to be anti-capitalists and anarchists, very much unlike *NTRTE*, who devote an enthusiastic blog post to the merit of a marketing gimmick of a Wall street company, and take about every other corporate lean-in 'feminist' PR stunt at face value.

Despite this seemingly large difference, both their respective discourses are recognition-extremist: instead of looking at how given a phenomenon is economically and socially embedded, they decontextualize identity, choice and tolerance, and eventually promote individualist survival strategies as the means of emancipation. They also claim to speak for humankind and to represent each and every justice cause under the flag of tolerance and inclusion and/or in the name of intersectionality theory vulgarized to mathematical formulas purportedly encompassing all forms of oppressions (see e.g. Gordon 2016). With this zeal to reach the position from which they can speak for all 'oppressed', they smoke-screen the fact that these groups also often make conflicting claims<sup>20</sup> as resources that can be distributed are finite. Interests therefore clash, there is no progress for all (Mies 1986: 76), there is no disinterested, innocent position to speak from against all the evils of the world. Obscuring the material interests behind their political agenda, these activists present those material interests as matters of transcendental goodness and universal humaneness, and frame those who oppose them as morally deficient.

Both of our examples act as the local governors of 'Western progress' in the 'backward East', as the local advocates of values and practices deemed universally significant. With this strategy it is easier to carve themselves space in a liberal public sphere.<sup>21</sup> Through this they reproduce the dichotomy between the self-colonizing narratives of the progressive West and the backward East while obviously imagining to stand *on the right side of history*, and with their actions they contribute to the shrinking of the already limited space for efficient advocacy beyond the symbolic agenda.

On a broader scale, many of the NGO sector's campaigns display the same dynamics as our two case studies. For example the Hungarian chapter of the Soros Foundation has staged a "good person contest of the year" (#jóemberverseny2017), and Amnesty International Hungary's new hashtag is now just plainly 'courage' (#bátorság). The NGO network played a role in importing notions of the liberal

20 E.g. the right to have children through surrogacy is increasingly being made in the name of LGBT rights or infertile heterosexuals, clashing with women's rights claims (see e.g. Stark 2011). 'Sex rights' (the right to have access to prostitution) also appear more and more often in the name of the disabled, again clashing with women's rights claims (see e.g. Appel 2010).

21 For instance, *NTRTE* is frequently cited in liberal media for such far-reaching activity as making alternative online versions of a sexist mustard wrapping.

self (individual liberty and responsibility, individualism in every respect) even before the regime change.<sup>22</sup>

If progressivism is inherently tied to elites contesting each other, then the downfall of progressivist agendas are also the failures of the elite legitimizing itself through being the harbinger of Western progress. At the time of the transition from state socialism to market capitalism, ‘progress’ has been conflated with the ‘West’, the Western model of society namely market capitalism and bourgeois liberal democracy. The modernist theory of progress is teleological, according to which progress naturally leads to ‘evolved’ societies, only some are further ahead, some are lagging beyond. Almost 30 years after the regime change Hungary could not reproduce Western European living standards due to the inherent hierarchies of the world system (and not any inherent civilizational deficit of Hungarians), and even the existence of the so-called ‘enlightened’ West comes to be questioned. Erzsébet Szalai (2014) even argues that none of the promises of the regime change were fulfilled. Also the broader concept of linear, modernist progress has been proven to be entirely false. No wonder then that the progressivists are either detached from or try to rule over the material, the local and the actual.

### **The First Version of this Paper Was Published on *OpenDemocracy* in English and on *Kettős Mércé* blog in Hungarian.**

“Virtue-signalling as a route to social status: instances from the semi-periphery”  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/orsolya-bajusz-dalmafer/virtue-signalling-as-route-to-social-status-instances-fr>

“Az erényfitogtatás és a progresszió ígérete a félperiférián” [http://kettosmerce.blog.hu/2017/05/14/az\\_erenyfitogtatás\\_es\\_a\\_progresszió\\_igerete\\_a\\_felperiferian](http://kettosmerce.blog.hu/2017/05/14/az_erenyfitogtatás_es_a_progresszió_igerete_a_felperiferian)

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22 See e.g. Kristóf Nagy (2014) about the Soros Foundation’s role in establishing a ‘Western’ art canon corresponding to ‘Western’ values or Emília Barna et al (2017) about feminist activism and NGOization.

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