

DISRUPTING ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY:
GENDER, BOUNDARY CROSSINGS, AND THE
POSSIBILITY OF KINSHIP IN HUNGARY
AN INTERVIEW WITH ORSOLYA LEHOTAI

ORSOLYA LEHOTAI is a Ph.D. student at the New School for Social Research and holds an M.A. in Gender Studies from the Central European University. Her research focuses on the politics of care, as well as the conditions, articulations, and multiple forms of civic responsiveness and belonging in relation to the mediation of the suffering Other in contemporary Hungarian politics. She is also a regular contributor to the opinion column of *Mérce.hu*.

She recently sat down with *Barricade* editorial collective member and fellow alum of Central European University's Department of Gender Studies, Zach Rivers, to discuss her experiences of organizing protests against the Hungarian government's legislations to close Central European University, how issues surrounding gender and migration are being mobilized in Viktor Orbán's "illiberal democracy," and some innovative ways for the Left to combat Orbán's regime.

The stakes are high—Lehotai describes the present moment as the last hour to protest in Hungary—but this wide-reaching and impactful interview offers paths for combatting the rise of right-wing populism.

The following has been edited for length and clarity.

ZACH RIVERS: In 2017, during your time as a master's student in the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University (CEU), Fidesz, Hungary's ruling party, passed a law commonly referred to as "Lex CEU" that would effectively make CEU's continued existence in Hungary impossible. You were one of the main organizers of the protests that formed against this law, which drew tens of thousands of people, and transformed into a larger movement known as *Oktatási Szabadságot* [Freedom for Education] that seeks to protect the autonomy of Hungarian higher education institutions from government attacks. Could you describe a bit your experiences of organizing these protests?

1. "Maradhat-e Budapesten a CEU? Orbán és Soros állítólag tárgyalt az egyetemről [Can CEU Stay in Budapest?]," *HVG.hu*, last modified February 2, 2017, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20170202_ceu_orban.

ORSOLYA LEHOTAI: The first information regarding Lex CEU emerged as a gossip in February 2017¹ from a pro-government weekly,

Figyelő, that suggested CEU might come under some new legislation due to some legal issues. *Figyelő* was the also the publication that published the list of “Soros mercenaries” of professors, journalists, civil society workers, and activists.² So, it started as this gossip that eventually got picked up in other media outlets and then government officials were talking about it. Then, about a week after the whole Lex CEU emerged as a gossip, some of us decided that we should stage a protest, that there should be an actual physical protest on the street.

When it started, we went to the CEU General Assembly [on March 30 2017], which was an interesting place to be—all these student representatives in the student body and the Dean of Students. Three of us who began organizing—myself, a Sociology student, and a Public Policy student—were just kind of exploring and scoping what people would think about it. It was even a question of whether this is something we should do or shouldn't do. There was a frustrating amount of silence from the administration and the student body. And when we proposed the idea of a potential protest to the student body, it created a certain kind of tension. This was the day before I wanted to go to the police to report that we were going to have

2. Christopher Adam, “Hungary Begins Intimidation Campaign Against Civil Society with Soros Mercenary List,” *Hungarian Free Press*, last modified April 13, 2018, <http://hungarianfreepress.com/2018/04/13/fidesz-begins-intimidation-campaign-against-civil-society-with-soros-mercenary-list/>.

a protest, which is a super formal and intimidating procedure. It was the first time I'd ever done that.

And so our introducing this at the general assembly was met with a kind of agitated response that insisted, "No, no, no, there are all of these Nazis on the streets and they're going to beat us up..." There was a certain distancing position. I'm not trying to undermine what's happening in Hungary—there is some form of street violence and some form of othering very explicitly happening on the street—but, if thousands of us show up, do we really care if there are twenty Nazis? Is that really what we're most afraid of? Because in my opinion what the government actually does feels much more dangerous than the possibility of twenty little Nazis showing up. The government just does it differently, operates with other forms of violence.

So there was this demotivating response in this meeting that we should not do it. And of course the gender dimension was there; that all of these men were telling us that we should not do this. We came out of the meeting saying, "Let's go for a beer." Everyone was depressed, emotionally drained, and paralyzed—what are we going to do? But then reading just the news...you were constantly bombarded with all kinds of updates. I was like, "Fuck it, let's do it, let's protest." There were some people saying to me, "You're from Gender Studies and now you're organizing this protest...This is exactly the controversial action you should not do; you should not emphasize that you're from Gender Studies." After all of these censoring and policing techniques that were happening, we were afraid what would happen if no one had shown up, then that could

have been very controversial. The government seeks every possibility to tell you that you are little, that you don't matter, that you are the minority.

So when 10,000 people showed up in the first protest, we did not expect that! Especially because there hadn't been any major mass protests for years. The last major protests had been in 2013 against a constitutional amendment that would restructure higher education, and then in 2014 against the proposed internet tax, when 80,000-100,000 went to the streets. Since then there have of course been issues that would have required responses and protests, and I'm always wondering what are the single issues that eventually bring people together to say "this is enough" and protest. There have been plenty of opportunities to do that: journalist portals were shut down, terrible amendments were passed, and no one did anything.

But, of course there comes the prestige of CEU and the general political-institutional power that comes with it. In terms of a genealogy, it is interesting that in that very first article in *Figyelő* about the potential legislation against CEU, in this article you can identify the start of something that at the time you couldn't quite put your finger on—for example, there was a sentence that mentioned something like, "CEU hosts Gender Studies and Sociology departments with feminist and Marxist scholarship." Just one little shady sentence put there, which not so many people really paid attention to at that time. But I remember thinking that something more is there. I remember speaking with Erzsébet Barát—professor of Gender Studies at CEU and the University of Szeged who specializes

in linguistics, language and gender, and critical discourse analysis—about this, wondering, how do you make sense of that sentence linguistically? It wasn't thematized, it didn't feature in a large way then.

3. The government's legislation against gender studies is a separate legislation to the Lex CEU. In August of 2018, Fidesz announced the revocation of university accreditation for gender studies as an academic discipline. This ended state funding to the only Hungarian language Gender Studies program at a Hungarian state university, ELTE [Eötvös Loránd University], which only began offering gender studies classes in Fall 2017. The dis-accreditation also affects the two-year M.A. in Gender Studies at Central European University. When gender studies was removed from the official list of Hungarian university accredited subjects, a new study program named the "Economics of Family Policy and Public Policies for Human Development" silently appeared on the list.

Then after those protests around CEU were over, this legislation against gender studies started.³ And if I had to trace it back...From the very beginning, before the whole anti-CEU legislation was introduced, these issues around gender studies were already there. It was just not emphasized or amplified at the time. So this was 2017—February was the first article and then protests from March to mid-April, and then I had to write my M.A. thesis. That was terrible, I don't want to think about those times. (laughs)

It's such a paralyzing position to be in. I mean, you cannot function academically or intellectually the same way because it's kind of a weird shock situation. You're supposed to react to something, but how fast? What reaction exactly? In whose names? As well as the internal struggles within different departments and how others view the Gender Studies department. It was such a weird time of even thinking about building affinity and any kind of kinship relations with different departments. It's

hard to build solidarity when people look down on your field of study. In my experience this manifested in various implicit and explicit ways. The whole anti-CEU attack did bring together scholars from various disciplines, which is great, but seemingly everyone has had an opinion on this field of study and for different strategic reasons.

We knew that the week following the first protest [on Sunday, April 2] the Hungarian National Assembly would discuss this introduced legislation. They had already made a decision at that time that it would go on a “fast track,” which means that you can literally introduce a legislation, discuss it for a few hours that same day, and then done. Terrible, inhumane legislation like this has gone through in the past with the most dangerous outcomes. At this point, we’d already gone to the police and said that we would do this human chain kind of spectacle that happened [on April 4].

This action felt the easiest for just very practical reasons: we were so tired after the first protest. And it seemed like a good idea to do a flash mob—people go around the building and hold each other’s hands, a cheesy kind of way of showing solidarity. But it was nice to experience that and see photos of that event. It felt like a form of self-care, to get your anger out there and say, together with others, “Fuck, what just happened?”

The night of the human chain action, a friend of mine had a visit by the police in Budapest. Another participant, an international student, was also visited by police, and their face was printed in many online portals discussing the protest. I was

very worried because of various political reasons. And then the morning after, I had the police visit me in an apartment where I was not even registered. I got in touch with journalists, because you have a constitutional right to ask what kind of police investigation took place. But it was not registered and there was something really shady about it. After this, I left my apartment for like a week and stayed with friends. I didn't go home, particularly because we were in the organizing stage of a major event [for April 9] in which 80,000 people took part. That felt like a different level of a state's surveillance regime—intimidating people in their homes. And that's enough, actually, that's enough to scare some people. I mean, that's the point.

The day after this massive protest, the Hungarian president, János Áder, signed Lex CEU into law. Since, there have been some irregular demonstrations, like when people showed up in front of the president's palace, but it just felt like the moment for protest was done and that a different kind of resistance became necessary. I felt like that form was exhausted, at least in that peaceful marching form. It was important and necessary to some extent but, with how pervasive the regime is right now, it's not what we need. Of course you are there, you're visible, you're on the street, but there's a feeling that you're not being heard, or more like being strategically unheard.

ZACH: It seems that what the Hungarian government is doing is pretty transparent, that there isn't a lot of hiding about its intimidation factors, its consolidation of the media, or the recent "stop Soros" laws that criminalize providing assistance

to asylum seekers, or de-legalizing NGOs that assist migrants...

ORSOLYA: They're very explicit about it. They're not ashamed or even pretending that this is something different than that. But on the other hand this kind of regime in some way wants to pretend that everything is fine, that nothing significant has changed in the political system. They constantly emphasize that they are building an illiberal democracy—that “democracy” emphasis is there, it's all about the people, power from the people. So we can go on the street, turn to the remaining media platforms, and no one is going to arrest us or shoot at us, but it's also not going to make any significant difference. They're not even pretending anymore that there is an opposition in the Parliament, they ignore them and humiliate them in every possible way. It was only recently with this new legislation surrounding overtime labor hours that was coined the “slave law”⁴ that oppositional obstruction happened in an actually very productive and performative way—people were going into the face of Orbán in the Parliament. Live-streaming and using social media as a way of showing that here, in real time, me and the prime minister,

4. The “slave law” refers to new legislation that allows employers to demand 400 hours of overtime labor per year, without promise of payment for three years. This law has been understood by many to be Orbán selling out the country's labor force to foreign employers.

look at how arrogant he is, and how explicitly and violently he ignores us. This performance did make a difference because basically otherwise Orbán doesn't give interviews to nongovernment portals, and does not even meaningfully engage with oppositional MPs. He only gives interviews to the public television and radio, so there's usually no direct interaction and confrontation with him outside of his own realms.

ZACH: There have recently been protests against the so-called "slave law" where there have been labor strike threats. Do you think these protests that have mobilized and linked different segments of society—press, labor organizers, student movements—hint at the possibility of affinity? Also, how do you see the European Union playing into these recent labor discussions?

ORSOLYA: Yes, some workers used strike techniques to increase salaries. It was definitely to some extent a productive strategy. It's just such an entangled situation. Just recently, the leader of the European People's Party [the Christian conservative party to which Fidesz belongs] and aspiring leader of the European Commission [Manfred Weber] visited CEU as well as met with Orbán's government during which he offered an ultimatum as the only way for Fidesz to remain in the EPP: stop anti-EU propaganda, allow CEU to remain in Hungary, and for Orbán to apologize for his behavior.

German companies have a lot of interest in Hungary. Basi-

cally the government was lobbying against Hungarian workers and saying that, “Oh, you should not strike because then all of these German companies are going to leave for countries with other cheap labor.” That was an explicit move in which the state actively places you in a very precarious position, basically saying “it could be worse” so accept your current miserable position. So having that kind of weird relationship with Germany and the Christian Democrats adds another layer to the story.

The strongest moments of the “slave law” protests were really before Christmas, between the 15th and the 20th of December last year. Before this, at the end of November, the self-organized activists of the grassroots group named *Szabad Egyetem* [Free University], many of them from CEU but also from ELTE and Corvinus [Hungarian universities in Budapest], came together and organized a Free University in front of the Parliament, on Kossuth square, with classes, lectures, and discussions. These “slave law” protests culminated in the arrest of some student activists, in particular a foreign student of gender studies has been wrongly targeted.⁵ And that group [*Szabad Egyetem*] has been quite active also in

5. Jakub Gawkowski, “How a Belgian-Canadian student became an enemy of Orbán’s state,” *Krytyka Polityczna*, last modified 26 December 26, 2017, <http://politicalcritique.org/cee/hungary/2018/student-enemy-orban-state/>.

confronting the Nazis at their annual little Nazi tour that they do in Buda.

After the strong resistance against the amendment of the labor law, the government went fairly low-key. They're playing with cycles of highs and lows, namely after strongly politicized events they turn to a different policy and group of people. This cyclical dynamics of taking and giving creates a very weird co-dependent power dynamic between the state and different groups, and in inter-group relations. After the culmination of the "slave law" protests, they introduced that from next year, all retired people will receive extra money. So, when they perceived that the "slave law" was not very popular, they then decided to give something to a different population demographic. Importantly, these are all one-time gestures. Of course, 10,000 Forints [approximately thirty-five US dollars] will benefit them, but it mostly shows the government's interest in keeping people precarious. It's the same logic with the Public Works schemes, local nepotistic labor and political relations, and how they're all interconnected with subjugation and loyalty.

It feels like a form of state capitalism, although I don't know if that's the best concept that we could be using, in that there is a certain level of wild neoliberalism and repressive and calculative state planning together. This usually includes the promotion of economic and cultural operations between "illiberal" regimes, and offering economic benefits to Russian and Chinese stakeholders and business organizations, for instance.

In terms of the movement of labor, the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs [Peter Szijjártó] recently said that “Hungarians are not migrants,” claiming that we are not migrants going from one EU state to another. This is a particularly ironic dismissal of the reality of many Hungarians who went to the UK and western Europe to work under better economic conditions. Just ask about their experiences of being perceived and treated as the eastern European other there.

There is a certain level of socio-political planning to appear as the savior of the Nation, of Europe. They declare that, “The West is declining, all of these immigrants are coming from the East, and Central Europe is the proper Fortress Europe who solely defends real European values.” Of course they’re not saying exactly what they mean by “European values.” One can assume certain things, since they play on deeply gendered, sexualized, and racialized lines, but they are purposefully vague at the same time, which also enables them an additional space to deploy their othering practices.

With both the new minimum wage legislations⁶ and the way that the Public Works⁷ program is organized in more rural areas particularly, the public and private spheres are in-

6. As of January 1 2019, the minimum wage in Hungary rose by eight percent, and will increase by another eight percent in 2020.

7. Created in 2010 after Fidesz’s 2010 parliamentary victory, the Public Works scheme is a large-scale employment program ostensibly designed to help reintroduce long-term unemployed persons back into the labor market. However, as the program does not provide training or mentoring for successful integration into the mainstream labor force, there have been widespread criticisms that the Public Works rather creates a dependency on the state. Persons employed by the Public Works scheme earn well beneath the minimum wage. According to the European Commission, in 2016, the Public Works employed an average number of 223,470 persons. See Frusina Albert, “Reforms to the Hungarian public works scheme,” *European Social Policy Network Flash Report—European Commission*, last modified June 2017, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=17911&langId=en>.

timately entangled, whereby the government builds on municipalities to organize their employment structures in the name of supporting local governmental politics. Literally bread for votes. Local municipalities are over-politicized, and people highly depend on them. These kinds of kinship relations are based on a logic of, “I’ll give you something if you give me something.” It creates a certain co-dependence, not in terms of caring for each other but in terms of policing each other, that is based on a certain distance between people. And people do feel alone and super dependent on Public Works programs and local mayors. The abuse of power is normalized in these circumstances. For example, there have been several stories reported from different news outlets about how people were attacked in villages if they didn’t vote for the local mayor, or that they were not allowed to get any kind of benefits. Another recent story from a southern village of Hungary involves a woman who was asked by the local mayor to provide sexual services in exchange for lending 15,000 Forints [approximately fifty US dollars]. Upon fulfilling these expectations, they made fun of her, video-recorded the case, and then spit on her. The banality of evil can be captured in the politics of these local frontiers.

It’s especially strong in smaller places, and the government does build on that. So in some way they do build something like a localization of the state, of a certain type of hierarchical state relations.

ZACH: I’m curious about your observation that the state maintains the precarity of its citizens—and thus creates tension

and turmoil—that it then exploits. In a recent article for *Mérce*, you write that critiquing Orbán either from a legal-institutional position, or hoping for the EU or international groups to intervene will not remedy the situation... That something else is needed.⁸ A way you offer forward is by addressing the psychic-emotional elements that have lain the groundwork for Orbán's policies to be so successful in a way. How did you arrive at this intervention that seeks to fight back by understanding the deep structures that produce certain psychic-emotional positions in the first place—isolation, loneliness, anger, fear, resentment, hatred? And how it has somehow allowed...

8. Orsolya Lehotai, "Radikális kormányzati lépésekre radikális válaszok kellenek [Radical government action needs radical answers]," *Mérce.hu*, last modified February 18, 2019, <https://merce.hu/2019/02/18/radikalis-kormanyzati-lepesekre-radikalis-valaszok-kellenek/>.

ORSOLYA: The kind of affective relationship with the leader, yes. A certain kind of frustration came from the opposition in Hungary. First off I do think that what the opposition did surrounding the "slave law," that was great. I think that is in some way an effective way of obstructing the system, that you go into their face and confront them. And if they don't respond then you still have a certain affective relationality to that. But I felt, and I still feel, that talking about how democracy is over, and about how we need institutions, and, "Oh but

we should think about human rights,” and all of that—I just...I don't find it useful to directly turn to the discourse of human rights, while keeping systemic abuses on the individual level. Of course, the Europeanization process in general brought about a different kind of understanding of citizenship. For instance, for myself as a queer person, the repercussions of the process have changed how we understand gay marriage or registered partnership. I do acknowledge that legal positionality and legal tools can be important in multiple ways. But, rights can be taken away at any time, and they have a tendency to create a certain assimilationist strategy in order to keep those top-down given rights, instead of imagining futures outside of these categories.

On the other hand, right now attacking the system based on proceduralism and legality is just not useful. It doesn't confront people. It doesn't go deeper to think about how these new institutions came about, or how these amendments came about, or how it is possible that in the Seventh Amendment of the Constitution they were able to put an anti-homeless legislation—in a constitution! What does that say about the regime? What does it say about us? How can you create any kind of inclusive community based on that and after that? What is the way back? How is it possible to not go back either to what happened after the political transition [in 1989]? Then it was all about civic values, it was all about NGOs, it was all about self-organizing individuals, and emphasizing political individualism. This was the whole idea of open society, and based on these values liberalism and conservatism could, even if in a

limited way, hold hands together—that was some way of having a certain consensus after the system change, a consensus with capitalism and market logic. But is it really what we have to go back to now? The common narrative is that it was the golden age, that we were on such a good path. I'm just not sure I buy it. It was the very same system that allowed this current regime to come about, that produced the current state and order of things.

So what are other ways of organizing a community? And ways of fighting back that are not only about confronting Fidesz supporters [by saying] that, “Oh you are a fascist because you agree with this,” but also understanding what made people support Fidesz in the first place. I mean, I'm not interested in the psyche of Nazis (laughs), but there are also a lot of Hungarians who vote for Fidesz who would not identify with the Far Right, and who see in Orbán something different. Also, I'd rather not fetishize the figure of Orbán. He is an effective politician in many ways, but I don't like those arguments saying that he is such an amazing and strategic politician. Yes, people say the same thing about other authoritarian leaders, but let's not do that comparison either—it does not allow us to understand what makes Orbán's system particular from a socio-economic and global point of view. He definitely found a certain way of approaching people. He does play with emotions and he does play upon precarity that he strategically creates himself through low wages, precarious work conditions, and a pervasive media spectacle of danger. By the latter I mean that the public media and governmental media platforms construct

the world and Hungary according to the binary of extreme danger versus dominating victory over others. According to Orbán's imperial logic, you are either dominated or dominate others. So in some ways the alleged danger and victory are co-constitutive elements of these othering processes, whereby he's very strategically playing different minorities against each other. He claims to be defending European values, and according to him, if all these immigrants from Muslim countries come in, then, they are going to endanger "our women, our Jews, our gays." It's a weird type of homo- and femo-nationalism, where Hungary's xenophobic past is seemingly redirected in the name of defending certain groups in the present from the future danger. They maintain this in-between position: we're protecting you, but also only if you support our exclusionary politics, so what kind of "protection" does that really mean and at whose expense?

The same logic is involved with women and women's rights. One of those [government-funded propaganda] billboards actually said—in Hungarian! addressed to an imagined "foreign group"—that "If you come to Hungary, respect our culture!" They also had some statement about how violence against women is higher in many Muslim countries, and they put a certain random percentage there as "proof." This "We are here to protect our women," and "our women" discourse is where I see the politics that connects this "protection" discourse with the new family plan-

ning law.⁹ Just recently—actually last Friday, on International Women’s Day—Zoltán Balog, the Hungarian commissioner for Roma integration (he was previously the Minister of Human Resources, which is also a lovely title), basically said that the people who the government wants to plan families are those who live for their children and not from their children. The latter, meaning people who are perceived to be benefiting from having children economically, which, in the dominant imaginary, refers to the Roma community. This “living from”/“living for” is very strategically deployed. According to this new family planning law, desirable women with desirable children (white Hungarian middle-class heterosexual and married women) don’t have to pay a certain amount of taxes. Which ironically also means benefiting from or, in other words, living from your children, right? But they articulate this distinction on politicizing “care,” namely that a certain kind of child caring is desirable, which eventually leads me to think that it is rather about caring for “us,” the imagined nation, than caring for children in general. When they say that, “Oh the Roma...but these children are already born in this country,” they create this narrative of “we own you,” and the concern is

9. Introduced in February 2019, the Family Planning Law aims to help the “demographic tragedy,” as Orbán describes it, of the negative Hungarian birth rate. The law stipulates that every married couple under forty, that is “child-bearing age,” is eligible for low interest loans, the repayment of which can be postponed three years for every child born. If a woman has four or more children, she’ll never have to pay income tax again. Importantly, banks must declare families “credit worthy” to be eligible for these benefits, which effectively excludes Roma families. For more information, see Eva Balogh, “A Closer Look at Orbán’s Family Package,” *Hungarian Spectrum*, last modified February 17, 2019, <http://hungarianspectrum.org/2019/02/17/a-closer-look-at-orbans-family-package/>.

not really that you are there but mostly about how the state benefits from you—how certain bodies, queer bodies, racialized bodies, are actually essential for the state in order to be the referent against which they create the idealized notions of citizenship. And to me this is just an exact example of the Foucauldian state racism and biopolitical shift to the “making live and letting die” concept.

ZACH: Are you writing about Roma rights in your academic research?

ORSOLYA: Yes, but I’m more thinking about othering processes in general. I’m interested in the forced mobility and migration of the Roma community from northern Hungary who have claimed asylum in Canada. On the general level, I’m interested in how does one become a public charge, what kind of discourses inform that, and how does that play out on bodies, and what bodies. Especially in relation to the so-called refugee crisis—in some way I was fascinated by, I mean this with the greatest irony, how the government effectively creates a certain image of security and insecurity against a community that hasn’t even ever lived in the country.

Like ninety percent of Hungarians have never met any refugees or migrants, at least not according to these given legal-political categories. The government’s politics capitalized on the suffering of people on the move to redirect its nationalist stance to a politics of “care for us.” The government’s propaganda was all about mediation: on the public television and ra-

dio, in social media and the Facebook portal of the Hungarian government. It uses an imagined enemy in a way that strongly positions the government as the only solution to “protect” you against people that are...not here. How can this approach constitute a political community based on literally negating the suffering of others? So far this seems very efficient, but it makes me wonder what else does it do to politics, does this imaginary work for the long-term building of their nationalism, and in what directions? Their inhumane stance certainly worked to criminalize homelessness in Hungary.

This made me think about Étienne Balibar’s interpretations of “interior frontiers.” That actually this distinction of “external” versus “internal” others is not necessarily useful to understand the politics that allows the Hungarian state and society to render certain “foreign”/“queer” bodies disposable. That maybe those power relations that enabled migrant bodies to be mobilized by exclusionary politics comes very much from the so-called “inside,” from the banality of everyday interactions, from those stories that are not being told or are being told in a certain way for certain ideological reasons. Then my concern becomes very crudely relevant in contemporary Hungarian politics when one asks what kind of political work occurs when leftist parties align to various degrees with the government on their anti-migration propaganda. How does that stance work when they call out the government against their treatment of the homeless and the Roma community? Can emancipatory politics against the government effectively work through redrawing the “inside” and the “outside”?

I feel very strongly that it is not possible. And that those seemingly leftist politics that try to do that very much reiterate this perceived “dangerousness” of the confusion between the internal and the external. Any politics that has anxieties about confusing the boundaries of given political categories is not emancipatory in my view.

ZACH: This seems to relate to the endless state-run propaganda campaigns of billboards, mailings, and referendums, whose repetition works to render the migrant population, Roma population, the homeless population, the EU, George Soros, and so on, as something like national threats. Relatedly, I’m interested in how you see “gender” being mobilized as a threat from the outside that poses a security risk to the nation?

ORSOLYA: Yes, it’s really interesting how all of these things come together. When the government talks about diversity or pro-migration policies or discourses, they say that, “No, for the national identity you need to have clear boundaries, you need to have clear values.” And what Soros does—because they keep referring back to him and the Popperian notion of open society and all of that—is confuse borders, confuse boundaries regarding national identity, citizenship, gender identity, sexuality, etc. When the anti-gender studies legislation started, namely the discussion to withdraw its academic accreditation, the president of the National Assembly, László Kövér, said—and he used the referent object of “they”—“they” first confuse the borders, and then “they” confuse our na-

tional identity, and then “they” confuse your gender identity.¹⁰ So he actually spelled out their frustration regarding potential emancipatory politics.

ZACH: Who is the “they,” in this scenario, those who confuse the borders?

ORSOLYA: He used the word “the colonizers,” those who colonize your territories. This “they” is usually used as an empty signifier that at the same time operates along gendered, sexualized, and racialized lines. So he actually made this very strong connection that their alleged issue with gender studies is about confusing boundaries and borders, that according to the government’s stance you’re either born a woman or a man and there’s no other way around it. Also when they talk about “gender,” they don’t really talk about gender—they talk about sex. For them, there’s no such thing as gender. There’s only sex with “fixed meanings” according to them, and then you have certain characteristics based on biological determinism. They use “gender” to further alienate people from the concept as it is a seemingly “Western” concept in their interpretation. Gender studies is about confusing borders and boundar-

10. “Kövér: A Kurultáj a magyar kulturális önröndelkezési igény kinyilvánításának legnépesebb fóruma [Kövér: The Kurultáj is the most popular form of Hungarian cultural self-determination],” *Origo*, last modified August 11, 2018, <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20180811-kover-a-kurultaj-a-magyar-kulturalis-onrendelkezesi-igeny-kinyilvanitasanak-legnepebb-foruma.html>.

ies, and that's something that threatens this "healthy" national identity. The governmental media also medicalizes any subversion of gender from their fixed notion of sex, and the "healthy/desirable national self" is also positioned against the "unhealthy, foreign, confused" other.

ZACH: As you said, there's been kind of a systematic thing since Orbán's election in 2010—in 2011, there were the media and constitutional reforms; in 2015, there started the anti-immigration propaganda campaign, which helped Orbán and Fidesz in the elections quite a bit; now, since 2017, there have been these attacks on higher education: forcing CEU out of Hungary, revoking university accreditation for gender studies, the politically motivated change in funding to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences [*Magyar Tudományos Akadémia*] that would dismantle its political autonomy; the "slave law" and family planning laws introduced in late 2018 and early 2019... Specifically, in the case of the government's justification for banning gender studies, you write in a *USA Today* op-ed that they said gender studies is not economically viable.¹¹ Could you speak more about this event?

11. Orsolya Lehotai and Anna Daniszewski, "Hungarian Officials Are Out to Get Gender Studies. That's Our Field and They're Wrong," *USA Today*, last modified September 19, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2018/09/19/gender-studies-threatens-hungarian-government-funding-pulled-column/1335958002/>.

ORSOLYA: They use both. Some politicians used this kind of economism, that the “national economy” doesn’t need this kind of degree without any data about what students even do after their studies. It was the first ever M.A. class of graduates, like maximum twenty students, and at the time they had not even graduated yet! The only source of data that was indicative against the propaganda was about the graduates of Gender Studies at the Central European University. Sociologists like Éva Fodor and others started to collect data about where graduates go, responding to this government falsification by saying that, “No, students actually do get jobs.”¹² Of course, it could be important to clarify certain things, like what does gender studies really do? But, also, do we really need to explain all of this to people who actually very much know what gender studies is about, they just strategically pretend they don’t for political purposes? They very much know this and that’s why they’re afraid of it. This current contestation of gender studies is not about having a discussion with a random person on the bus who asks, “Oh, what does gender studies even mean?” That confusion is certainly there. My grandma didn’t know what that was either and that’s okay. It is important

12. “Adatokkal cáfolja a kormány legfőbb érvét a gender szak bezárása mellett a CEU rektorhelyettese [Data from the CEU deputy rector refutes the government’s main reason for closing gender studies],” *Hvg.hu*, last modified August 24, 2018 https://hvg.hu/itthon/20180814_Adatokkal_cafolja_a_kormany_legfobb_ervet_a_genderszak_bezarasa_mellett_a_CEU_rektorhelyettese

to talk about these things. But the government does see what is at stake and that's why their opposition to it is so saliently and explicitly articulated.

I was really blown away by this connection that the president of the National Assembly made about the confusion of identities. Here's the thing: my kind of activism was like, "Yeah, sure, it is about that! Let's go into that!" I do think that we don't have to be so afraid [to say] yes, in some way, that's what we're doing, confusing those boundaries and seemingly naturalized identities. And [to not be afraid] to have those difficult conversations about how does gender come about. How do we understand gender identity? What does biological sex really mean? How does that affect you? How is normative masculinity created right now in Hungary? And femininity? In terms of having a direct and uncompromised discussion, I feel like we didn't go deep enough into that. That we are talking about the confusion of boundaries, and not trying to make gender studies more marketable or palatable.

ZACH: When you say we didn't go deep enough—in terms of having these difficult conversations within the gender studies and feminist communities?

ORSOLYA: In the Hungarian context we didn't. And actually, people were running away from queering categories like it's fire, purposefully ignoring it, and calling it an exaggeration. And saying that queer theory and Judith Butler are too "rad-

ical.” This created a very difficult position to be in as well, to create critical dialogue with allies, in a way.

ZACH: As you mentioned earlier, CEU occupies a unique political-institutional position within Hungarian higher education and that—I remember feeling this too—Gender Studies there was held kind of separate even within CEU itself.

ORSOLYA: These perceptions are difficult because what I experienced, especially with the discussions around the Lex CEU protests, is that some people were actually frustrated by the fact that CEU was so strongly associated with gender studies. People started saying, “No, but we have this amazing Network Science department and other departments” to academically self-credit themselves in certain ways. And of course, CEU made statements that “we support Gender Studies” and that was important but...

ZACH: It took them a while to issue a statement...

ORSOLYA: Yeah, it took them a while, and they actually issued a statement later than any other Hungarian academic institutions. And that was also not without trouble. There was noticeably not as much support for Gender Studies as there was for CEU as an entity. I felt like people were to some extent waiting for the “gender cloud” to disappear.

ZACH: I want to go back to something that you wrote in the *USA Today* article: that gender studies is dangerous for the government because it provides critical thinking tools to understand oneself within systems of power.

ORSOLYA: Against those who want to render you insignificant.

ZACH: Yes. Removing the tools of critical inquiry, reducing the opportunities to question governmental policies, feels to be a large-scale concerted effort that goes hand in hand with the consolidation of state-run media, the billboard propaganda.

ORSOLYA: What I've been thinking regarding that is also to dare to question seemingly naturalized categories that are assumed to be real. This is how you are supposed to perform in Hungary. This is how I'm supposed to be a woman, a queer woman. This is how I'm supposed to be a proper Hungarian. Otherwise you're disposable and questionable. The government uses politicized categories as if they have the same meaning to all of us. But do we really mean the same things? I also want to question whether being a woman, or being perceived as a woman, means the same thing living in the capital, even within its various districts, as it does living somewhere else in a village in Hungary. These kind of categories have different significance in individuals' lives and how they inhabit them.

What I want to make sense of is why women vote for the government. Why specifically many women actually vote for Fidesz? How can we question why or how people make those choices? How to even question the master's tools as Audre Lorde essentially investigated the master's tools in relation to the master's house? It's similar with the conservative gay voters who support the government. For example, Milo Yiannopoulos was invited to Budapest and the government performed a certain kind of discourse that appears welcoming.¹³ But, of course, only to an extent. The government also utilizes certain persons so as to demonstrate some faux acceptance.

I'm also interested in certain analytical tools to make sense of us in this position and with one another. And gender studies or feminist politics provide certain analytical tools to understand various possibilities for kinships beyond the woman/man, homo/hetero, nature/culture, body/mind, and human/non-human binaries.

That's where the question of affinity comes in. What are the boundaries of that exactly. These thoughts on potential collaborations between various political entities emerge from the events of the opposition and leftist

13. In May 2018, Yiannopoulos gave a taxpayer-funded lecture at the invitation of the pro-Orbán government foundation "Public Foundation for the Research of Central and East European History and Society [Közép- és Kelet-európai Történelem és Társadalom Kutatásért Közalapítvány, KKTKK]." Steve Bannon also spoke at taxpayer expense during the May 2018 Visegrad-4 conference in Budapest entitled "Europe of the Future." Hungary previously courted the US Far Right by hosting the 2017 World Congress of Families (WCF) summit, an anti-LGBTQ US-based Far Right Christian group that champions the "natural family" with anti-LGBT, anti-immigrant, and anti-reproductive rights discourse. They have wielded direct political influence in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Russia. The Southern Poverty Law Center identifies the WCF as a hate group.

parties working with the far-right Jobbik party. Is this really the way to go? Even some prominent intellectuals like Agnes Heller supported this collaboration in the name of noting that “Fidesz is more dangerous” than working with Jobbik. Is this the only possibility—to turn to existing parties instead of actually imagining other ways of creating platforms and other ways of connecting with each other?

14. Orsolya Lehotai, “A szégyen politikája a baloldalon: aktivizmus másként? [The policy of Shame on the Left: Activism Otherwise?],” *Mérce.hu*, last modified April 4, 2019, <https://merce.hu/2019/02/04/a-sze-gyen-politika-a-baloldalon-aktivizmus-maskent/>.

15. A satirical political party that uses absurd tactics to counter the government’s anti-immigrant and nationalist policies, such as placing animal candidates on election ballots as well as countering the government’s anti-immigration billboard campaign with their own campaign with messages such as “Sorry about our Prime Minister” and “Did you know? Over one million Hungarians want to relocate to western Europe.” Started as a street art campaign, the MKKP recently qualified for state campaign funding.

My concern is to find shared spaces to be angry in a way that that doesn’t alienate people, to be angry in ways not based on name calling or shaming.¹⁴ Rather, how can we make sense of a productive shame in a way that actually brings people closer to each other by calling upon and confronting regulatory power on bodies by saying: “Yeah, you too? Me too.”

I remember, exactly a year ago on the March 15 holiday, the Hungarian joke party Two-Tailed Dog Party¹⁵ [*Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt*, MKKP] made an alternative *békemenet*, which is this pro-government organized so-called “peace march” introduced by Fidesz in 2012 that is, in reality, about promoting exclusionary politics as the only means for “caring” for “us.” So the Two-Tailed Dog Party did an alternative peace march along with other opposition parties to commemorate the March 15

revolution. On this event and then on other consecutive ones, there was a person who was holding various flags—maybe you’ve seen it, the image went viral—the Hungarian flag, the EU flag, the rainbow flag, the Roma flag, and the far-right flag, all on one pole. (laughing) I remember being frustrated and thinking, “What is happening? How do we make sense of this?” This kind of gesture feels to me like this weird American free speech discourse that says, “Oh you can be a Nazi, you can be this, you can be that, it’s all your right.” Is this really what we want to go for? For me, no, I don’t want a rainbow flag to be with the fucking far-right flag!

For me, that post-ideological notion also indicates the crisis of the opposition, and how the nongovernmental opposition has a savior complex and they’re waiting for a leader. This assumes that this leader whom they are waiting for already exists, instead of actually thinking about organically producing a leader. To actually make efforts within a community to produce political personnels, having the assumption that leftist populism requires a leader, and if we think that populism is the way to go. On the left, that is a current discussion—whether you need a populist leader or not...similar to the current Bernie Sanders-slash-other politicians who might prove effective in trumping Trump and right-wing populism. We have similar discussions in Hungary, too. The opposition accepts basically anyone, previous Jobbik members, etc. as a potential leader against Fidesz. It just feels so desperate...I mean, honestly, who wants to be among desperate people? (laughs)

ZACH: I'm curious now with regards to the state of the left wing as you see it in Hungary. What is the state of the opposition to Fidesz at the moment?

ORSOLYA: The Left, especially the Hungarian Socialist Party or even the Green Party, could not give a politically charged answer or political program that would be outside of the realm of Fidesz. They are reactive and do not create a program or any kind of ideas that could go beyond the boundaries and categories set up by Fidesz. They are in a defense position so that they can only respond to what Fidesz says or does, which in this way constantly confirms Fidesz and their agenda setting. I feel that as long as they don't go beyond Fidesz's boundary and create a new paradigm, like in terms of discussing who constitutes "us" that would not be fundamentally built upon a logic of the other, which they still do—until that happens, they're not going to have productive and inclusive resistance against the current government.

ZACH: It strongly struck me in some of your writings that that you're interested in developing a political imaginary, or some sort of action, that would not be programmed by Orbán's playbook, where Fidesz wouldn't set the rules of engagement.

ORSOLYA: Yes, something that disrupts. You could see that when the opposition went right in his face in December. He was not confronted meaningfully for years with an actual Hungarian journalist's question. Especially not in the parlamenta-

ry setting where he feels the most empowered and acts like a little lord. He felt so uncomfortable, he did not know how to respond. He was nervously laughing, that was all that he could do. What kind of reaction, or distance, does that produce for the audience who is looking at that mediation? He was so uncomfortable. I loved it. Making him uncomfortable is one really good way to go. When you confront people like Orbán, they are forced outside of their learned-by-heart playbook that they repeat over and over again and for some time they don't know how to respond. It shows that this guy is not invincible, that he is not the magician whom he is fetishized to be by both sides. He's just an arrogant man. (laughs)

ZACH: When people try to describe Orbán, there is this proliferation of signifiers: crony capitalist, a state capitalist, a soft fascist, authoritarian, neoliberal authoritarian, kleptocrat, ethnic-chauvinist, etc. I wonder if you think this difficulty to name Orbán's mode of governance corresponds to the difficulties of there being a large-scale effective opposition movement? Do you think such naming struggles are useful? Do you find it useful to apply "fascism" to Orbán?

ORSOLYA: I personally have difficulties when the Hungarian opposition calls Orbán fascist or a neo-Nazi or any other alternative of these. I find that problematic because it doesn't go deeper than just mere name-calling. This is not to say that certain comparisons cannot be made, or that there aren't some norms according to which we can say that someone or some-

thing is not democratic, that this or that is authoritarian, or fascist. I do think that there can be space for using these terms, although they're used non-consequently and there are many confusions about their deployment. Historical references can be useful, but if we just transport certain concepts to describe the various ways a regime is currently organized, then that takes away the force of critique and contestation in the present. Going back to the past evokes all kinds of terrible affective responses. And people know what that means. I'm also not a big fan of some leftists who call Orbán a communist, specifically when they use this signifier of communism only to designate that he is pro-Russian. Of course, they do this because he identifies as anti-communist, and they assume that that would insult him. But it doesn't give us the complexity of the system and how it's connected in the present with other states and with other regimes. I feel that it's an easy way out of meaningfully discussing what's happening.

Protests are a whole different scenario, saying things like "Nazis go home," because then you have the possibility, a different way to confront people, resist and speak to power. The opposition to some extent still has that capacity to confront the government even though they do have limited possibilities. In terms of media presence they just need to deploy new and creative, and nevertheless critical tools.

I think that this is the exact moment—the last hour—when you can confront the government. That's why I keep referring back to last December. I felt like that was kind of a start. Of course, we'll see how that goes. Right now, with the

new parliamentary session it doesn't really happen. And we're seeing a sole focus on elections, and procedures. Elections are important, and are coming up in May, but that just re-creates this weird notion and distance that politicians care about their position, or short-term goals, and not really about what's happening on an everyday basis.

I do think that we need to think about how the past and the present are connected together. And how they are using the historically created othering of groups, or othered groups, that provides an easy way out of having even self-reflection of how we got here and what's next. I keep debating this because it does have a political weight and a moral disposition to say "fascist" or "populist." And when I say that they shouldn't be called fascist, I don't care if it's theoretically accurate or not. It's not about that. It's more about what kind of affective response it creates from pro-government voters, who we want to better understand and open up space for contestation.

ZACH: Because it has an alienating effect?

ORSOLYA: Yes, that goes back to the politics of shame and understanding how can we make sense of doing that. I don't think that we have to be super friendly to people who want some of us to die or disappear. But at the same time, structurally, we cannot ignore those divides that exist and are created, and we cannot ignore the dangerous allegiances of different groups. Somehow we should develop the creative capacity to seek different tools to apprehend what is happening. And also to find

the subversive capacity of making fun of it to some extent. In some way irony is dangerously missing from Hungary and that's what the Two-Tailed Dog Party does. They use the same discourses and images that the government does, but locating them in a very random context and with exaggerated nonsensical content. They blur the lines between the nonsensical reality that the government has created and their obvious lies through satirical interventions. Humor is also a certain way of practicing self-care that helps one to exist and find sustenance in this specific political context, and that can ultimately bring more people together through understanding that these are shared struggles that we face on an everyday level.

