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# Fear Eats the Soul: self-quarantining in an illiberal state

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*Fear Eats the Soul* is one of the several remarkable films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder from 1974. The unlikely love story between a 60 year old German widow, who works as a cleaner, and Moroccan guest worker in his late 30s, shows how fear is manifested in words, in actions and also in the stomach ulcer of the guest worker. Fear is a governing force of all lives: fear saves us from drowning in a steep river and fear also prevents us telling an honest opinion about our colleague's work. Fear, especially one type of it, the 'existential fear', has recently been used as an explanation for the resurgence of illiberalism and different forms of populism. One fears from impoverishment, job loss, premature death due to an infection in the underfinanced health care system, loneliness and the real list of subjects of fear can go on. But fear is a tricky emotion as Fassbinder knew it so well. It eats the soul as it becomes a part of the body, and not only drives one's actions but also makes life lived with dignity impossible.

There is not another EU member country which has been using taxpayers' money from other EU member states for generating fear as a form of governance like Hungary. Hungary serves as 'laboratory' of illiberal polices. (Pető and Vasali, 2014) The tolerance for others has been transformed into xenophobia. A generous supporter of Hungarian culture, George Soros, became a target of an anti-Semitic campaign. A flagship institution of the national higher education, Central European University, turned to be an alien body and was forced to go to exile. An established, international academic discipline, gender studies was transformed into a

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‘threat to the nation’. The government decree revoking license of study programs on gender, without explanation or without consulting with professional institutions in Hungary resulted in making decisions about scientific matters without consulting with representatives of the profession. More importantly the government sponsored media attacked academics listing them as ‘enemies of the as intellectual work of teaching and scientific research become a life-threatening occupation once again creating fear among academics. (Pető, 2020a and 2020b)

How does it feel like to live and to work as a feminist in academia in a climate of social fear?

What Abby Ferber aptly termed ‘public targeted online harassment’ has been a part of my everyday life since I began writing articles available online for the wider public. (Ferber, 2018) What was new besides the usual anti-Semitic slurs in comments is that in 2017 I received death threats via social media. I wasn’t sure whether the sender was a lonely man, guided by sheer anger, someone who doesn’t have to be taken seriously, or whether this was a serious threat not to be taken lightly. Unfortunately it was left it for me to decide as the Hungarian police refused to investigate. It meant a lot that my workplace, CEU stood by my side and offered a body guard. What would be the impact if I would enter to a gender studies classroom with a body guard? Would a body guard save me from fear? Or just the opposite as seeing a CEU professor walking around the campus with a body guard might have added to the already existing fear of the colleagues and students. I refused the generous offer independently that the prosecutor’s office also rejected to investigate on September 7, 2017, on the basis that ‘According to the Penal Code the use of phrases such as ‘I will hunt you down’ and ‘I will dispel you from the face of earth’ cannot be identified as a crime against a person’. This ‘public targeted on-line harassment’ is connected to a new phenomenon to threaten and to challenge the political and scientific legitimacy of gender

equality and science. Its targets are primarily scientists, educators, thinkers; and the offender's goal is to raise fear and uncertainty, rather than pose a physical threat. The very kind suggestion I received from colleagues and friends that I should 'take care' had only impact that I started to fear that it is my own mistake if I am not taking enough care of myself. Fear eats the soul and makes the air you breathe disappear around you. I know it from family stories, and also from stories I teach, how in the 20<sup>th</sup> century different political systems very successfully created a culture of fear as a form of governance. The COVID Pandemic just contributed to the list of fears which have been already listed with one exception: that this was a fear of the very real infection by a virus.

My position is privileged: as a tenured full professor at CEU even eligible for an institutionally paid bodyguard, my main concern at the moment is how to move my office I used for the last 14 years to Vienna; how to set up my new home there as political refugee. During the pandemic, as I stayed in home office teaching and conferencing online, I was thinking how to react to fear and to the absence of that what was has been consumed by the fear.

What I miss from my life is civil courage, or with the new buzzword: resilience. One feels speechless for the first time, when a septuagenarian male member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in retirement for more than a decade, is censoring my article about memory politics. His reason is that he is afraid that the journal will lose state support. One continues to be speechless as a young female historian does not want an online debate she moderated to be available on the internet, because she is afraid of being fired, and she has mortgage to pay. Discussing collaboration and compliance with colleagues is a difficult discussion, as it is a moral dilemma if one can expect somebody else to commit what he or she perceives as an act of self-sacrifice. These discussions are even more difficult as the pandemic results in increased poverty and job loss. This is

in a country where cronyism influences who gets a job, without regard to their qualification or achievements. This is true from getting an appointment at the local post office to an appointment of a Rector. The counterargument that one is irreplaceable or even just a good professional, does not work.

The COVID19 crisis makes Kant and his concept of 'foul stain of species' timely again. This concept means how humans like to see what they want to see explaining dishonesty and self-deception. Will the Hungarian historical profession end if the financial support for a historical journal read by only 75 professional historians in Hungary will cease to exist? Will this female colleague be fired from her job if she moderated a roundtable? Of course not. But in both discussions, the 'foul stain of species' led the unpleasant conversation to personal direction where I was blamed not only for having too high moral standards when arguing against self-censorship but also for having a safe place to go to exile in Vienna.

Self-censorship worked well in surviving the long decades of communism, but it is a particularly dubious strategy in illiberal polypore states.

In the past decade, political scientists have been discussing in great length the terminology with which it is possible to understand recent developments in different countries, like Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Brazil, US, and Turkey. With Weronika Grzebalska we call these states illiberal polypore states based on their common modus operandi. (Grzebalska and Peto, 2018) Unlike other political scientists who are admiring these states because of their effectiveness we argue that the polypore states do not have any original ideas just taking ideas of others using them for its own purposes, which is self-maintenance.

The polypore state is working with three concepts. The first is security. In its public discourse the state securitises all possible aspects of life and

policy areas including portraying gender studies and critical intellectuals as threat. This concept of polyporism is useful in spite of its biological connotation to understand the relationship of the illiberal states to religion. The global illiberal influence and the local nationalist discourse intersects in portraying of EuroChristianity that needs to be defended both from Western moral decay and Islamic aggression has become a popular discursive trope in both countries, with both leaders presented as the hope for European Christian civilization. But the meaning of Christianity is also emptied as the polypore state only uses those elements which are useful for its survival, like spreading hate and ignored the elements which might undermine its existence like solidarity and helping people in need. Second is the ideology of familialism that state policies are supporting selected, mostly middle-class families, consciously ignoring the value of gender equality. Religion is used to legitimise heterosexual and nuclear families on the expense of other forms of cohabitations portrayed as existential threat to the community. And third, which is the most relevant for academic knowledge production, the founding and funding of new research and teaching institutions with the same profile as the already existing one, is creating a new phenomenon: the polypore academia. In the past decade in these illiberal polypore countries several new research institutions, museums and universities have been founded with exactly the same profile as the already existing museums and universities had. The difference between these polypore institutions and the already existing ones is that there is no quality assurance and the available funding seems limitless, since funding from other state institutions are pumped to these also state financed institutions. Religious ideas are creeping into science like creationism is taught in secondary education as a result of the state centralized control of curriculum and textbooks when only one officially approved textbook remained in all subjects. The polypore state also works with façade-ism as these institutions look like universities or textbooks but in reality, they are just spreading hateful propaganda.

During communism the quality and some private spaces of intellectual work served as sites of resistance. Now the higher education introduced its own evaluation system based on loyalty and not on indices and impact factors neoliberalized academy worked so hard in the past decades to introduce. Partly because the new cadres and newly founded educational programs are failing not only meet international standards but more importantly it helps to delegitimize those academics who do. It was not that difficult as the government just replaced the key decision makers in the different accreditation committees and as rectors of universities with loyal supporters or cronies. During the higher educational reform illiberal states are using a securitized language and labeling anybody who is criticizing these provisions as '[enemy of the nation](#).' Illiberal polypore states are setting up parallel loyal institutional system (new universities, research institutes are being set up) in order to channel public and EU funding from previous public institutions to loyal oligarchs including oligarchs buying public universities on money they made in the porn industry. Today the delegitimization of academic and scientific work is happening which eats up the space from intellectual and academic resistance. Now our decisions how we act, whom we work with, where to publish our work, what kind of assignments do we accept of course are also driven by fear. Fear of not fulfilling our roles as professors, teachers, researchers and public intellectuals. When fear is eating the soul then basically eating up the role model of being responsible and useful thinkers and knowledge producers. (Pető, 2019)

Fear also has an impact on gender studies professionals. Luckily nobody was fired or imprisoned in Hungary after the accredited two years master's program in gender studies was deleted from the accredited study list in 2018. The test of the small and dedicated gender studies community was rather how they react to this new political situation. Will fear take over? Those who chose gender studies as their field became accustomed not only to be ignored but also facing hostility. The debate about gender

studies, which made Hungary of 10 million to gender experts of 10 million who had an opinion about curriculum, reading list and learning outcomes. In Russia, already in the early 2000s, department of gender studies were renamed as Departments of Family studies. Faculty who had no international ties had to choose between shifting the field of research to non-irritating topics for higher education administrators or to leave the country. This was not the case in Hungary simply because there has not been any gender studies departments in public universities. Still public money now is flowing to set up Family Studies Program at a recently privatized public university, Corvinus University with faculty who are openly dedicating themselves to critically studying the subject. If that is 'foul stain of species' time will tell. The sudden public interest in gender studies led not only to an unprecedented interest in gender studies as far as topics of thesis, dissertations are concerned, but CEU Gender Studies in Vienna also received unprecedented high number of applications.

In academia fear influences the choice of topics, words we choose and arguments we make. Fear eats the soul and makes academics believe that self-censorship can partly create a space not eaten up by fear. The 'foul stain of species' might deceive academics believing that there is a good answer in a morally corrupt system. For feminist academics there is the international community of gender studies scholars who can serve as a moral yardstick. Of course this community is divided and has its internal debates but there is no question about academic standards.

Neoliberal universities transformed humanities and social sciences as branding institutions. COVID is the moment of truth when glass jar of 'foul stain of species' started to crackle. Not a surprise that the Polish government has chosen during this health crises when there was a ban on protest to further strengthen the abortion law or the Hungarian government attacked trans rights. The Romanian Senate also attacked gender studies in the middle of the pandemic. I gave an interview to one



of the Romanian television channels about how this ban is luckily counterproductive to those who believe they can control science. On the following day my mail and Facebook messenger were filled up with hate mail. COVID opened up a chance to all of us to say what is real and true. This should be celebrated and used with care especially in countries living in parallel realities.

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