

Is there a future for the private sphere?

The complex bond between the public and the private in the light of fertility trends in Hungary

Abstract:

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate the complexity of the bond between the private and the public in Hungary today. It also intends to find directives to strengthen the position of the latter. This can be done best through the analysis of the current status of couple-relationships, fertility, the raising of children, and work within and outside the domestic sphere. It will show the enormous discrepancy, which lies between ideals and reality: Hungarians have a high estimation for the family and marriage, but at the same time only a few can turn these longings into reality. The high estimation and the longing for a life in family could serve as a solid basis for future social policy in Hungary, but only through supporting the harmonization of the relationship between the public and the private sphere.

Key words:

demographic crisis, fertility rates, public, private, family, child care, employment, gender justice.

Streszczenie:

Celem pracy jest przedstawienie złożoności związku pomiędzy prywatnością a sferą publiczną występującą obecnie na Węgrzech. Zamiarem jej jest również znalezienie wskazówek, aby wzmocnić pozycję tej drugiej. Najlepiej dokonać to poprzez analizę obecnego statusu związków par, płodności, wychowania dzieci, pracy w i poza sferą domową. Pokaże ona ogromną rozbieżność, jaka występuje między ideałami a rzeczywistością. Węgrzy mają wielkie poszanowanie dla rodziny i małżeństwa, ale jednocześnie jedynie nieliczni potrafią zmienić te pragnienia w rzeczywistość. Duże poszanowanie i tęsknota za życiem w rodzinie może służyć jako solidna podstawa dla przyszłej polityki socjalnej na Węgrzech, ale jedynie poprzez poparcie harmonii związków między sferą publiczną i prywatną.

Słowa kluczowe:

Kryzys demograficzny, wskaźniki płodności, publiczny, prywatny, rodzina, opieka nad dzieckiem, zatrudnienie, sprawiedliwość płciowa

„Family has become a *night-lodger accommodation*, where it's only at night when the wife and the husband meet, in case there is a husband and a wife at all.” – Mária Kopp and Árpád Skrabszki made this rather negative statement at a conference in 2008 to describe the state of family and couple-relationships in contemporary Hungarian society.¹ The importance and relevance of the statement is shown by the fact that its veracity is based on everyday experience: it's an utterance which sounds true from the lips of a social scientist, just as much as from that of a husband, a wife or a grandparent, experiencing the boundary line between the two worlds of work and home, dividing and connecting the two simultaneously. Moreover, it would not only prove to be true in Hungary, but on almost any spot of European society.

The statement above is even of greater importance, as it concentrates most of the changes the family as a social institution went through in the last two or three centuries of European history. Firstly, the nuclear family is a construction that came into being parallel with modernity. It proves to be a particularly fragile formation, constantly endangered by the factors, which made its existence possible.² Secondly, in course of the dissolution of the former ideal of the “house” - where production, consumption, and socialization of children, together with all other various functions of the family, were present more or less as one single unit - the modern family has undergone severe functional changes and has delegated many of its tasks to higher levels of society.³ Thirdly, the spheres of the “public” and “private” appeared, both with their own internal logic, resulting in a division between home and work, which was carried through on a gendered basis, connecting men with the public, women with the private sphere. Fourthly, despite the division, there is a strong mutual reliance between the two spheres: the public requires the resources of the private, and the private cannot sustain itself without the support of the public. The public restricts and standardizes the

¹ M. KOPP, Á. SKRABSKI, *A boldogságkeresés útjai és útvesztői a párkapcsolatokban*, in: *Felkészítés a házasságra és a családi életre*, Budapest 2009, 87-104, 87.

² U. BECK, *Der späte Apfel Evas oder Die Zukunft der Liebe*, in: U. BECK, E. BECK-GERNSHEIM, *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe*, Frankfurt 2001, 184-221.

³ M. MITTERAUER, *Funktionsverlust der Familie?* in: M. MITTERAUER, R. SIEDER (eds.), *Vom Patriarchat zum Partnerschaft. Zum Strukturwandel der Familie*, München 1991, 100-125.

potentials of the private.⁴ Fifthly, not only the family, but also marriages and couple-relationships, constituting its basis, had become more fragile. The place of “arranged marriages” was taken by relationships based on free choice, whose existence is dependent on the potentials presented by the constantly changing public sphere.⁵

The paradox of the changes listed above is that they not only called the private sphere into being, but at the same time have jeopardized its existence from the very beginning. This is well demonstrated by the current social crisis. The state of balance created by modernity seems to be upset. People see utmost importance to raise the question about the bond between the public and the private, since they experience their tension on their own skin: Is it possible for the different public sectors of society, first of all the economy, to cooperate with the private sphere, especially the family, in a symbiotic way, or they necessarily drain all its reserves like a parasite. The increasing number of divorces, the low level of demographic figures, the lack of natural communities and the growing amount of people living in seclusion all point to this direction.

The processes mentioned above show the typical, long lasting development in western societies. Due to its history, these changes affected Hungary in a different way, mostly delayed and unprepared. The family structure of the traditional agrarian society was refashioned abruptly first by the forced industrialization of socialism after 1948, second by the emergence of capitalism after the political change in 1989. Due to the rapidity and unexpectedness of these changes, the symptoms caused by the loss of balance between the two spheres are visible to a marked degree.

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate the complexity of the bond between the private and the public in Hungary today. It also intends to find directives to strengthen the position of the latter. This can be done best through the analysis of the current status of couple-relationships, fertility, the raising of children, and work within and outside the domestic sphere. It will show the enormous discrepancy, which lies between ideals and reality: Hungarians have a high estimation for the family and marriage, but at the same time only a few can turn these longings into reality. The high estimation and the longing for a life in family could serve as a solid basis for future social policy in Hungary, but only through supporting the harmonization of the relationship between the public and the private sphere.

⁴ U. BECK, E. BECK-GERNSHEIM, *Riskante Chancen - Gesellschaftliche Individualisierung und soziale Lebens- und Liebesformen*, in: U. BECK, E. BECK-GERNSHEIM, *op. cit.*, 7-19, 15.

⁵ H.-G. GRUBER, *Christliche Ehe in moderner Gesellschaft. Entwicklung - Chancen - Perspektiven*, Freiburg 1995, 23-89.

The demographic crisis

While the early second half of the twentieth century is associated with the loss of its functions, the institution of the family today is challenged by the demographic crisis. The political change in Hungary in 1989 did not only mean the adoption of democracy and free market from the west, but also its models of family and fertility.⁶ The total fertility rate in Hungary (1,35) is one of the lowest in Europe, surpassing only Slovakia (1,33) and Poland (1,23).⁷ In contrast to the other new EU-member countries, birth rates in Hungary did not increase in the last years.

The figures that deserve special attention in the case of Hungary are the ones showing the growing gap between the planned and realized number of children. While the latter figure has decreased by 0,6 since the early 1990's, the number of planned children has remained constant. An average of 2,1 for planned children – which is true without respect to gender – has not changed in the last twenty years. It is not the longing, that is missing, but rather the chance to turn it into reality.

What are the reasons, that the children desired are not born? Both the temporal delay of childbearing, the constant transformation of relationships and the social-economical uncertainty play an important role there. Today women in their ideal age of childbearing give birth to their first child much later than the previous generations. The growth in the number of people involved in higher education, and the transformation of work structure influence the timing of the birth of the first child significantly. It is very improbable that somebody studying at university level will start a family in these years, and it will stay this way for a couple more years after graduation, since she will probably want to enjoy the financial and other benefits of her effort – at least for a short time.⁸

Fertility is set back in a similar way by the changes in the structure of couple relationships in the last years.⁹ The importance of permanent couple relationships is shown by the fact that only an insignificant proportion of the singles (5 percent) opt for this lifestyle consciously and willingly. Despite the shrinking numbers of marriages, it is still the most supported form of couple

⁶ Z. SPÉDER, *Gyermekvállalás és párkapcsolatok átalakulása*, in: T. KOLOSI, I. TÓTH, G. VUKOVICS (eds.), *Társadalmi Riport*, Budapest 2004, 137-151.

⁷ B. KAPITÁNY, Z. SPÉDER, *Gyermekvállalás*, in: *Demográfiai portré 2009. Jelentés a magyar népesség helyzetéről*, Budapest 2009, 29-40.

⁸ SPÉDER, *op. cit.*, 142.

⁹ T. PONGRÁCZ, *A párkapcsolatok jellegzetességei*, in: *Demográfiai portré 2009. Jelentés a magyar népesség helyzetéről*, Budapest 2009, 9-18.

relationships. Although the figures show a 40 percent decrease concerning the number of marriages in the interval between 1989 and 2007, it is less than 20 percent who claim marriage to be an outdated institution. “When it comes to lifestyle preferences, the Hungarian society is still for marriage, and it will probably stay this way.”¹⁰ (It must be added that the proportion of the rather unstable non-marital relationships is growing, many of which are never converted into a marriage.)

But how do things stand concerning the factors supporting the harmonization of the private and the public spheres of life, thus stimulating the willingness in the population to bear and raise children? There must be four factors listed at this point: “the paid, but not too long child care leave; the access to affordable day nurseries of sufficient quality; the increasing role of men in domestic work and child care; and all the conditions of the labour market (flexible working hours, part-time jobs, etc..) which can help with the balancing of the duties in the public and the private.”¹¹

Child care leave

Hungary is one of the countries in Europe supporting the home care of young children in an exceptional way. It stands out from the other European countries with the length of child care leave. In comparison with Great Britain with its 1,5 months, Italy (4,5 months), Austria (4 months), and Germany (15 months), the length of supported child care leave in Hungary is 25 months.¹²

In contrast to western societies, in Hungary the debate between those emphasizing the importance of “economic”, and those stressing the “developmental” factors has not taken place yet. The former group is mainly concerned with the possible harmonization of child care with the labour market, the latter stresses the need for the presence of the parents, first of all the mothers, at home, as the key to the healthy growth of children. The latter aspect has been predominant in Hungary since the political change of 1989. For this reason alternative options for harmonizing the private and the public have not been developed yet. The absence of a public debate is shown by the fact that there are no “extensive surveys concerning the demands of

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 15.

¹¹ Z. BLASKÓ, *Családtámogatás, gyermeknevelés, munkavállalás*, in: *Demográfiai portré 2009*, *op. cit.*, 41-51, 47.

¹² M. KORINTUS, *A gyermekgondozási szabadsággal kapcsolatos kérdések Magyarországon és az Európai Unió néhány államában*, in: I. NAGY, T. PONGRÁCZ, *Szerepváltozások. Jelentés a nők és a férfiak helyzetéről 2009*, Budapest 2009, 65-78, 67.

the population, or the question what families with children would choose, if it was on them.”¹³

The incentive nature of women’s employment has been a neglected area since the political change. The system of employment is rather one sided and inflexible. Although the presence of the mother at home is supported through a long maternal leave and financial allowances, a return to the labour market and child care outside home are made almost impossible by the policies. Fathers hardly ever use parental leave to stay at home and give up work for child care.

Access to child care institutions

As long as the home care of young children is particularly supported, the number of child care institutions is rather low. The time of socialism was characterized by the spreading of child care institutions. These were sentenced to closure with the dissolution of state companies and the straitened financial possibilities of local governments. It is especially true in case of day nurseries. While in 1990 there were 50250 places open to children younger than three, in 2007 it were only 24934.¹⁴

Only 8 percent of children younger than three are looked after in day nurseries, which is one of the lowest in the European Union. This number turns out to be particularly low in comparison with countries supporting the employment of mothers, such as Denmark (70 percent), the Netherlands (50 percent), France, Sweden and Belgium (over 40 percent).¹⁵ It is not the attitude of families with children towards the public child care system, but rather the structure of family support, which is responsible for this ratio. Although most people “think that it was better to raise children younger than three years at home, (the period that corresponds to the time of maternal leave – KG,) most people don’t agree with the statement that children are hit hard by spending most part of the week in day nursery, and they remind of the need for the return of the mother to work for financial reasons.”¹⁶

Sharing domestic work

The third factor, which is often mentioned as the key to the harmonization of the public and the private, is the egalitarian sharing of housework, or,

¹³ KORINTUS, *op. cit.*, 69.

¹⁴ BLASKÓ, *op. cit.*, 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ KORINTUS, *op. cit.*, 72.

at a minimum, the improvement of the participation of men in domestic work. Based on the statement, according to which “the emancipation of a country can be measured (...) by the participation of men in housework and child care”, Hungary counts as one of the lesser emancipated countries in Europe.”¹⁷ This is particularly interesting in the light of the forty years of “state feminism” and “forced emancipation” in the socialist era. In other post-socialist countries in the region, especially in the East-German region, an egalitarian division of labour is predominant. In contrast to these countries, a large asymmetry is present in Hungary between men and women when it comes to housework. Hungarian women work in the domestic sphere 3,3 times as much as men do. When it comes to smaller, regular tasks, the contrast is even more striking with a difference of 36 times.¹⁸ The importance and responsibility of women in the private sphere is shown by the fact that it is mainly the women who handle money in Hungarian families.¹⁹

An important factor of a fairer division of housework is education: while in the case of the lower educated the asymmetry in the division of housework is denoted by the number of 3,7 times; in the case of the higher educated “just” 2,5. What is surprising is the fact that these figures are not influenced by the engagement of women in the paid work, thus making the double burden of women even more severe. When it comes to the number of completed tasks, the burden of women in Hungary is the greatest in Europe.

Another curiosity of the Hungarian situation is that despite the disproportion present in the sharing of domestic work, women are not dissatisfied with this state. One of the reasons for that is that “women accept or at least acknowledge the traditional character of labour division, and the fact that they are responsible for the tasks at home. (...) This requires, without doubt, more load and responsibility, but at the same time provides them with emotional surplus, strengthening the sense of importance and providing with the feeling of indispensability.”²⁰

Employment, part time jobs

The fourth factor is the structural conditions of employment, and especially the offers of part-time jobs. Hungary also lags behind here in the European Union.

¹⁷ T. PONGRÁCZ, L. MURINKÓ, *Háztartási munkamegosztás. Azonosságok és különbségek Európában*, in: I. NAGY, T. PONGRÁCZ, *op. cit.*, 95-116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 101.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 106.

In contrast to other EU member states, the employment of those in their active age is fairly low. In 2008, 72 percent of men aged 15-64 were employed, while in Hungary it was just 63 percent. In the case of women the ratio alters to 59,1 and 50,6 respectively. The latter figure cannot be explained by their stay at home to do housework full-time. Women entered work parallel with the introduction of socialism in Hungary and the two-earner family has been prevalent ever since. This did not alter with the political change.

The most common reason for women quitting paid work temporarily is child bearing and child care.²¹ With its 15 percent of employment rate among women raising children younger than three years, Hungary brings up the rear in Europe. This lag changes and a close up to the European average occurs when children reach the age of three and mothers enter the labour market once more.

Another distinctively Hungarian feature is the almost complete absence of part-time employment. While in Europe it is 31,1 percent of women working part time, in Hungary it is a trifling 6,2 percent. The shortage of part-time employment shows the inflexibility of the Hungarian job market, especially when it comes to bearing and raising children. This is also true for the reduction of working hours supporting the employee not on regular bases, but rather in state of emergency.

What's wrong with the system?

Based on the sketch above it might be concluded that there is sufficient room provided for the private sphere in today's Hungary. The length of the parental leave could be mentioned as a seemingly unambiguous sign for that. The system seems to correspond to the traditional ideals that people carry about the family.

At the same time reality is showing a different picture. The traditional, conservative system, once emphasizing the needs of the children and the traditional roles of mothers, has become ineffective and unrealistic by today. The birth rates are the best indicators for that. There is a "discrepancy between the system of values and demographic performance, between the child-centred attitude and low fertility rates."²²

The question to be asked here is both of ethical and practical nature: What are the means and ways to create just frameworks enabling the harmoniza-

²¹ BLASKÓ, *op. cit.*, 48.

²² PONGRÁCZ, MURINKÓ, *op. cit.*, 112.

tion of the public and the private? How are they supposed to be arranged in order to secure the necessary conditions of a good life?

The current system is unjust at several points. Firstly, concerning child care leave, its extreme length is matched with its rigidity. While for the poorer parts of society parental benefits serve as a regular income, for the (rather weak and fragile) middle class it proves to be a serious loss and jeopardy concerning both their position on the work market and their financial potentials. "Today in Hungary (...) the bearing and raising of children is basically a choice between maternity and career."²³ This proves to be true especially in the case of women with a university degree. With the bearing of children they risk the loss of their position at work and a large part of their income. Thus the system is strongly discriminative against working, well qualified women and their families. They have to rely on the income of their partners – in case there is a partner to support them – and experience serious drawbacks concerning their position at work. The current system supports the anachronistic model of the mother giving up her profession, and the father who is able to support and sustain his family from his income.

Secondly, the lack of day nurseries hampers the harmonization of work and family further, reducing the chances of a return to work excessively. This is another sign of the rigidity of the system, concreting the long and exclusive parental leave, and depriving the families, especially women, of alternative options. It afflicts the middle class once more, who prove to be mobile, when it comes to the place of work, and have to succeed without the everyday support of their extended family.

Thirdly, when it comes to sharing housework, the gap between the system and the reality is one of the largest. However, most women are engaged in paid, full-time work, the load of housework is almost exclusively on their shoulder. But, in the case of Hungary, we can also speak about the double burden of men, since men tend to take besides their full-time work a second job too. The sharing of housework can be understood as a deformed version of the traditional (bourgeois) division of labour, where, parallel to the public work, the old symbolic cast remains: the man as breadwinner, the woman as the guard and organizer of the sphere of home. This narrows the possibilities of the private further down, since the logic of "life divided"²⁴ proves to be valid not for the eight working hours, but further on. This causes overload on both sides and is unjust when it comes to the distribution of the means of

²³ KORINTUS, *op. cit.*, 72.

²⁴ E. BECK-GERNSHEIM, *Das halbierte Leben. Männerwelt Beruf, Frauenwelt Familie*, Frankfurt 1980.

living. (For example, one of the factors responsible for the early death of middle-aged men is the constant stress and overload at work.)²⁵

Fourthly, the rigidity and inflexibility of the labour market is another feature rendering the harmonization of the public and the private more difficult. The lack of part time work and the inflexibility of employers are factors hindering women's return to work. The shortage of day nurseries more or less precludes women with children younger than three to do so. Once they return to their work in full-time, the birth of another child is highly improbable.

Towards a responsible policy

What can be done through a responsible social policy to promote the harmonization between the private and the public, to facilitate starting a family, the bearing and raising of children. Without these, the private sphere is unsustainable in any society.

Firstly, it has to start at the reality of life, and distance itself from anachronistic ideals. The antagonism between the two worlds of work and home should be not conceived as something "natural". If it is assumed as such, the private will suffer for the superior force of public. It must be taken into consideration that the "bond between home and work is hardly symmetric. Workplace is of greater influence to family life, as the other way round, where the fear of one losing his work and thus the pressure to fulfill expectations play an important role. First of all it's the family suffering for the conflict of paid work and home duties (...), since the latter are overshadowed by the involuntary priority of the prior."²⁶

The relationship between the private and the public should be viewed rather in their mutual interdependence, and ordered from the perspective of justice. It is important to shape social structures in a way to relieve the private sphere of the duties it cannot perform in a balanced manner. This can be done by the redistribution and delegation of the duties to higher levels. The changes in the social roles of men, women, parents and other actors have to be taken into consideration as well. Roles have to be distributed to provide all actors to participate to the possible greatest degree, and in a balanced fashion in both spheres, providing everyone with the possibility of choice.

²⁵ M. KOPP, A. SZÉKELY, Á. SKRABSZKI, *Mi magyarázhatja a magyar férfiak idő előtti egészségromlását és halálozási arányait?* in: M. KOPP (ed.): *Magyar Lelkiállapot 2008*, Budapest 2008, 212-221.

²⁶ PONGRÁCZ, MURINKÓ, *op. cit.*, 108.

1) Child care leave needs to be transformed in a way to make both the long term care of children, and the harmonization of child care and employment possible. At the same time it is important to offer a real support not just for the poorer parts of society, but also to the middle class, preventing them from losing their social status, position on the labour market, and large part of their income. The position of men also needs to be secured in the system. Men should be encouraged to take their share in child care and domestic work. According to long term international observations, “fathers only take advantage of the child care leave, if it is only them, who are entitled to do so, and is paired with a high income.”²⁷

2) The access to child care institutions needs to be increased to relieve the families. This would enable the working parents to care for their children without giving up their paid work fully and on a long range.

3) An egalitarian distribution of work both in the private and public should be aimed at, providing both men and women with an equal access to both spheres. Another important factor is the increase of the prestige of housework, especially when it comes to the encouragement of men to take their shares in the domestic work.

4) The rigidity and inflexibility of the employment market should be eased. Women (and men) on child care leave should be provided with the options of distance- and part-time work. Employers should be encouraged to support their return to work on a gradual basis. This would support not only an increase in birth rates but also economic development.

Closing

The aim of this essay was to show that it is not sufficient to emphasize certain values and ideals, but also to consider the reality of everyday life. Hungarian people are family and child centred, but they are less and less able to turn their longing into reality. The question today is whether they are provided with the sufficient support through a responsible social policy to build up their private spheres without excluding themselves from the public. Children need a loving family, but it should not be forgotten that the family needs the support of the public. Instead of their confrontation, it is time to make them cooperate.

²⁷ KORINTUS, *op. cit.*, 75.

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