

Luisa Passerini

Laudatio for Andrea Pető 16.5.2018

European Commissioner,

President Günter Stock,

Professor Quadrio Curzio,

Dear Andrea Peto,

and All Participants in this ceremony,

I am particularly glad to present to you this laudatory speech since I deem it highly appropriate that the 2018 Madame de Staël Prize be given to Andrea Pető. Indeed, during the last fifteen years, feminist scholarship on Germaine de Staël's work has stressed the indissoluble link within Staël's thought between the idea of political freedom and women's emancipation. The author of *Delphine*, *De l'Allemagne* and *Corinne* was acutely aware of national, racial and gender differences, and she concentrated much of her reflection on understanding the convergences of such differences. Her work reinforced the centrality of gender to the idea of political and social order in the early nineteenth century. In this sense her work is of great relevance today, when feminist thought insists on intersectionality, understanding with this term the close connection of „gender” with other categories of difference, such as nation, class and age, a connection that has become indispensable in order to avoid studying gender in isolation and to place it in a global perspective.

The category of gender is also central to the historical research done by Andrea Pető in various fields and continues to be a crucial preoccupation of her activities as a feminist public intellectual. Equally important along this line is her concern about the link between current illiberalism in Central Europe and anti-gender campaigns in many European countries, and about the tendency to substitute family mainstreaming to gender mainstreaming. Contrasting the increasing presence of political actors rejecting liberal democracy, Andrea Pető has joined her voice to the battle for the symbolic

control of the human rights discourse and the implementation of equal rights across Europe.

In her ego-histoire, collected among other ego-histories of feminist scholars by Kathy Davis and Mary Evans in *Transatlantic Conversations: Feminism as Travelling Theory*, Andrea remembers that she always wanted to be a historian, and I would like to add: an oral historian, since much of her work has been based on oral memory. No wonder she insists in her own autobiographical reminiscences on the importance of the radio for her political formation. At sixteen years of age she listened to Radio Free Europe, which helped to „create [her words, LP] her political self”. More specifically, she evokes listening to the news when the army crushed the Solidarity movement in Poland, with her father, who had been a prisoner after the 1956 uprising. Her interest for orality and for direct relationships with people brought Andrea to a degree in sociology at the University of Budapest ELTE, and her work in this field started with interviewing Roma people. However, she also wrote a thesis on 17th century English utopian movement. This conjunction: the interest for the past and the strong attention to social and political burning questions of the present, is something that I find recurrently distinctive of Andrea’s work.

At the same time she defines herself as a „deeply political animal”, feeling part of the 1989 generation. Following her political interests, she often found herself the only woman in the group, as in the case of the so-called ’flying universities’, meetings held in Budapest since the 1960s in private apartments by intellectuals who were banned from teaching. She became engaged in such meetings during the 1980s, but she left because disappointed by what she judged „the neoliberal equation of privileged consumption and political liberty” as advocated by the men in the group. I see this move as a sort of inversion between gender roles, in the sense that in this case it was men who worried about having a fridge and saving the butter, while a woman cared more for the daily link between the economic and political.

This rebellion was one of the components that led Andrea Pető towards feminism. The other was the experience of breast-feeding her son Oliver, who was born in 1989, while friends and comrades were on the barricades participating in the collapse of Communism. Again, this personal turn in her life was linked with intellectual and political research, and she wrote a dissertation at the CEU on employment and women. In the early 1990s, after periods of study in Oxford and contacts with historians from the US, she started teaching courses on women’s history in Eastern Europe in the

history department of CEU. All this was made possible, she acknowledges in her *ego-histoire*, by her husband István György Tóth (a historian of early-modern Europe who died prematurely in 2005) taking care of their son in Budapest.

I met Andrea Pető in the early 2000s, when I was Professor of History of the Twentieth Century at the European University Institute, Florence. Since October 2001, Andrea was part of a research project that I directed, largely based on oral memory and concerning women migrants across Europe, which was funded by the European Commission's Fifth Framework Programme. The GRINE Project (*Gender Relationships in Europe at the Turn of the Millennium. Women as Subjects in Migration and Marriage*) intended to open new perspectives on Europeanness by connecting the inspiration of pioneers like Ursula Hirschmann with the motivations and hopes of women moving across contemporary Europe. The oral history campaign was conducted in five countries: Bulgaria, Hungary, Denmark, the Netherlands and Italy, with both native and migrant women. The research group at ELTE, Budapest was headed by Andrea Pető; her team worked on the Hungarian diaspora of women in Europe and produced an excellent collection of oral sources as well as a very good analysis of that diaspora in the European context. The Bulgarian team was brilliantly directed by Miglena Nigolchina, whom I am glad and grateful to see here tonight. The project, completed in 2004, produced a collective book (*Women Migrants from East to West*, 2007), to which Pető contributed with a creative piece on "Food talk as a marker of identity and a frame of narrating difference and belonging", a further sign of her versatility.

Andrea Pető was also a Jean Monnet Fellow at the EUI in the academic year 2001-2, when I had the chance to know better her and her work as well as her son, who was then a twelve years old adolescent attending school in Florence. I appreciated her written contributions on several topics of European relevance as well as her interventions in our seminars and courses at the Department of History and Civilization. Since then, I was able to observe her competence across various fields of studies as well as the international dimension of her researching and teaching, and to appreciate her approach in conjugating themes like Europe and gender on topics of various kinds. Her intellectual characteristic is indeed the capacity to gender historical phenomena as well as questions of remembering, silencing and forgetting, in innovative ways that shed new light on their history. This is evident especially in her

work on the Holocaust, memory and gender, a cluster which is of particular significance for Europe and Europeans.

Equally valuable is her research – which has come out in various articles but will in a few weeks be published as a new book – on the memory and narrative of rape in Budapest and Vienna in 1945, after the liberation by the Red Army. Soviet soldiers committed innumerable acts of rape – Andrea is right in refusing to go into the numerical aspect of the question (there is an ongoing debate on the estimate that 10% of the female population in Budapest was raped) – rather she concentrates on the analysis of silence as well as the feelings of identity and alterity in the private and public memories of this type of violence, with a striking documentation based on the interviews she conducted combined with many primary and secondary sources,

Andrea herself has observed that she always had research questions rather than simply a competence in a particular field or historical period. Her first book on the Hungarian women's movement of 1945-51 (published in 1998 in Hungarian, in 2003 in English) was grounded in women's social history. Her second book was an exploration of the life and memory of Júlia Rajk, whose husband had been one of the executed after Hungary's first Stalinist show trial in 1949. This book testifies to the relevance of memory politics in Andrea Peto's work and her contribution to the issue of competing memory cultures. I cannot list here all her books (six authored ones, thirty-one edited, and almost three hundred essays and articles), but I wish to mention one recent accomplishment of Andrea as editor, the handbook on *Gender and War* (2017), an outstanding achievement in putting together an interdisciplinary sequence of twenty-two chapters on various aspects of this diad.

Andrea Pető was a young scholar when I first met her, while she is now a fully affirmed intellectual figure, who has travelled to almost every country in Europe. She is presently Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at the Central European University in Budapest, and Doctor of Science of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. At some point during the late 2000s I lost a personal contact with her, but I kept following some of her production. While trying to update my knowledge of Andrea Pető's activities for the present talk, I was struck by the vastity of her engagement in things European, both scientifically and institutionally. She is present and active in many European journals, in European conferences and workshops, in associations and institutions that go from EUROCLIO in Romania to the EU Directorate General Research, while also being an adviser to Horizon 2020 from 2014 until now, and

serving in various European groups on gender, included the fields of science, technology and environment. I am impressed by the international scope of her experience, with prevalence of the European dimension. Andrea Pető can work across linguistic boundaries, since she is knowledgeable not only in Hungarian, but also in English, Russian and German. Her international engagement does not reduce her presence in Hungary, where she has also been involved in publishing as an editor of many volumes in English, Russian and her native Hungarian.

I particularly value her engagement with topics concerning Eastern and Central Europe and their role within the European Union. I like her argument that the dynamics of the ‘return’ to Europe of the former Communist countries should be understood in a perspective allowing parallels between ‘East’ and ‘West’ without dismissing national dissimilarities. I also appreciate her insistence that, while little is known to English-speaking audiences, many advances in scholarship are taking place in Central and East Central Europe. Last but not least, I admire her dedication to teaching, in many universities all over Europe, often using in her classes digital techniques and educational films. In fact, she also participated in preparing the brochure *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe* for Degree Programs.

Andrea, I think that we share a common interest for establishing a gendered genealogy of thought that includes women like Germaine de Staël, Ursula Hirschmann and Júlia Rajk, but does not exclude men like the Europeanists Denis de Rougemont and Frank Thompson. Rougemont is well known for his work on love in the Western world and his ecological activist. Thompson acted as a liaison officer between the British Army and the Bulgarian partisans during the Second World War and was executed by pro-Axis in Litakovo in 1944. His idea of Europe attributed a crucial role to Central and Eastern Europeans in what he called “the real Europe” of peoples, and he established a strong link between his two major concerns, communication and education, in devising a pedagogical plan for educating European children and teaching them languages in such a way as to promote the solidarity of Europe and overcome misunderstanding between the people of the continent.

I would like to conclude by stating that I share a hope which a few years ago Andrea Pető expressed in these terms:

“we can hope – she wrote – that trans-European transactions will continue to flourish with dignity, empowering generations of women ready to implement change in spite of the difficult times ahead of us”.

My warm congratulations to Andrea Petó!

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