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Per un Paradigma Diverso: Studi Matriarcali ed Economia del Dono

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On the Political Ideology of Family: From Alienation & Suffering to Transformation

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Introduction

I want to share some of my reflections on the relationship between family and politics.

Suffering

For me the starting point is the experience of women and men in different kind of therapies and the perception of individual harm and suffering by the family of their youth and the family constellation they are actually in. This may be seen as a collective illness, which comprises men and women as a whole in "western" societies¹.

Family therapy brings to light trauma and fear, released by the so-called failure of „family“, especially by distant or overprotective mothers or by fathers who do not take at least part of the responsibility for their children. Or also by unhealthy relationships parents may have with each other.

Propaganda

At the beginning of the 21st century we face a collective propaganda which upholds the concept of the nuclear family, which occupies the dreams and realities of women and also men as a kind of collective illusion. This happens at different levels: by the media, by popular psychology, but also by scientific approaches in pedagogy, psychology and sociology. The mainstream is one which colonizes the thinking of generations, especially since the Second World War. The Nazi era and fascism created a new picture of the family as a whole and systematized it in a new way which left its traces until today, especially in Germany and Austria.

¹ „Western societies“ here mean common cultural and social concepts like the domination of the nuclear family.

Theses on the power of definition and violence

I want to suggest that – using the patriarchal “power of definition” - the exclusion of privacy and intimacy – which historically traces back to the Hellenic Greek and their division of oikos and agora or politeia, the public area, - there was not only undertaken the attempt to subject women, children (and slaves under the will of the „Hausherr“, master of the house, pater familias), but also to intentionally exclude the whole area of emotions and love from the area of politics, this process was accomplished by the Enlightenment.

Eroticism, the economic dependency of women, as well as the giving of birth and caring for children were all excluded from the area of politics – and by that from that which ostensibly really „counts“, the world of politics, the global economy. Thus an attempt is made to create a public world free of emotions, relative ties and kinship, dependencies and economic value and appreciation.

This approach would explain why people who are politically interested usually get bored by the topic on family. Because it seems and people are led to believe that there is nothing great, important or creative in it, no strategic thinking is necessary or obvious. Family is thought to be a “female subject” and therefore free of common relevance.

Patriarchal, or let`s say common science on history or politics, however is fascinated by violence and war, by « great emperors », conquerors » and « heroes », like Doris Wolf (2009) stated in her work on the Egyptian past. Publications on the « clash of civilisations“ (e.g. Huntington 2002) or religions are hyped and reviewed broadly in the media, whereas studies on family stay in the shadow, not supposed to be important in terms of politics or economy.

Claudia von Werlhof argues on patriarchy as a war system:

„The development of patriarchal society is related to the invention of something that from then on has been called „war“, and since then patriarchy has been dependent on the ongoing existence of war(s) even in so-called „peace times“. (Werlhof 2007, 141)

If we use the violence thesis on the institution of family we become aware of the fact that it can be only be upheld by means of structural and symbolic violence on diverse yet interrelated level. Muthien in her work on human security and women in Soth Africa (2010) used the concept of Johan Galtung (1996) who developed a security model with the

triangulation of violence including structural, cultural and direct or personal forms of harm.

So we can identify :

- As cultural violence - the Catholic Church which declared itself the one and only moral institution which upholds the claim of lifelong marriage and the birth and upbringing of children within this kind of partnership.
- As legal power of subjection – and therefore structural violence - of all who belong to the *oikos*/ the household by the *pater familias* – these family laws which discriminated against women and « illegitimate » children were in force until the 1970s throughout Europe and are still in force e.g. in all the Arab states with the exception of Morocco and Tunisia.
- As direct or physical violence which manifests itself by excessive violence by men against women and children as well as sexual violence by men (fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles) against boys and girls.
- At the social-structural level: Family policy or population policy is to be regarded as part of a violent ideological project, by propagating the so-called two-children-family by totally neglecting the diversity of men and women and their inclination and possibilities towards having and caring for children. It is violent to standardize the number of children and to threaten economic consequences (less pension rate) in case of non fulfilment of the quota as had already happened in Austria.
- At the cultural or symbolic level by idealisation and heroisation of specific kinds of living forms as kind of patriarchal hegemony and simultaneously excluding the subject on family from the political and economic discourse.

Definitions of Family

The problem of the family is implied within its definition.

A glimpse back into Hellenic Greek and Roman times shows a meaning of family of descent, but foremost one about the ownership of the house and the women, children and slaves who belong to it by the free possessing male citizen.

There are definitions within the scientific disciplines of Statistics, Demography, Sociology and Family Science (e.g. Nave-Herz 2004) – they all range from a narrow understanding of the

mother-father-child-relationship to the acknowledgement of diverse family forms – always as deviations - like patchwork, living apart together (LAT), and the research on these broader senses, on generations, siblings and so on.

But they all adhere to equivalence of fathers and mothers for their children and the myth of the lifelong relationship of couples especially when they have children. This image is not only part of family rhetoric in popular science and the media, but also in the creation of politics on family. Furthermore within the scientific discourse the picture of a totally different family system has no place.

The so-called crisis of the family

The pretended non-politicisation of family is ongoing today despite the feminist slogan of the 1970s that “The personal is political”; we can state a kind of cementation and re-familialisation in times of economic crisis. The discourse on family is not comparable with the ones on the « big political and economic problems » of our times. But the so-called crisis is evident: low fertility rates, high divorce rates, overburdened mothers, absent fathers. There are many studies in this area but the scientific questions are conducted from a view which does not question the paradigm of patriarchal family.

The call for „values“ and complaints of the « fall of the family » derives only from the side which wants to uphold these structures. The family is one of the „pillars“ of patriarchy, apart from politics, economics and moral authorities (the church) – it is called the « smallest cell of the state ».

I estimate the “crisis of the family” as a necessary consequence of its institutionalised character and as a proof that it is based on a normative logic; that women are to give birth to children to guarantee the reproduction of children (and society and its systems of oppression and consumption) for the father and father state. By that the moral institution of the church and political institutions have identical interests: to exploit and instrumentalise women. So giving birth and raising children is a fundamental political act. And *moreso*, consciously *not* giving birth is a radical political act by women who dare to challenge Patriarchy.

Politics

Genevieve Vaughan (2007) has shown mothering, the work done mostly by mothers, as an economic category, what the mother does is economy in the best sense of the word *oikos*, it is nurturing others/ the vicinity. The mother also is the one who acts as the mediator of the world, linguistically, symbolically, like Luisa Muraro (1993) used to say.

Motherhood for me is political in the sense that

- giving birth is a deeply political act and
- I understand my immediate environment as entrusted to me, which I influence in a creative and responsible way.

In German we have a new expression called "*Familienarbeit*" (family work) which in fact includes several paradoxes. It is not work because it is not part of the Gross National Product. It is furthermore not comparable with wage labour as it happens continuously without pauses and it creates the basis for market and socialist economies. What has happened here by re-naming is that "family work" has got a kind of acceptance as compensation for the loss of regular income. In fact we face a kind of modernisation of motherhood, its grimy/smudgy character should disappear in favour of the new sanitised image of "carework".

***Cui bono* und alternative models**

What I try to argue here is to ask who was historically benefitted, and continues to benefit, from the system of the institutionalised family. Why – despite all the problems we face in the nuclear family – there can be found a very fixed attitude that this is the only kind of familial system imaginable. By asking that question – and furthermore in search for alternatives - the following facts become clear:

- The nuclear family is one of the pillars of patriarchy, that is why it is called the "smallest cell of the state". The state is based on unpaid work but furthermore on the emotional work which is needed, to keep the balance between the relation of kindred and nonkindred persons, the motherwork as filler and buffer in between. Furthermore women keep a compulsory (heteronormative) erotic relation with the (compulsory male) partner she mostly depends on.

- This net of relations is ambivalent in many ways and exposes the nuclear family to a continuous tension test. Family « fails » as most time women do not want to carry this burden any longer. As the financial dependency has diminished during the last decades women actively exit these conditions, this is what Claudia von Werlhof calls the « vote with the feet ».
- But nobody tells women that there are models to live familial relations in freedom, with independence and self-respect. Freedom means to separate the need for an erotic relationship from the care for the children. Erotic life in matriarchal societies is realised by so-called visiting marriages. Children stay in the responsibility of a matrilinear family; when the love affair ends children are not the victims, but stay in their shelter/custody with the social father, the brother/s of the mother. By this social behaviour traumas are avoided by fathers who may leave and become absent parents.
- Egalitarian societies do not produce images of « eternal love » as it is the character of passion and erotic attraction that it is punctual, in the moment, it cannot stand dependency and there is no guarantee for the future.
- Who benefits from the fact that the structures of still existing egalitarian societies are not more widely known, and that they do not get the acknowledgement they deserve. It is a persistence of the „culture“, of the Christian tradition which grants marriage to be « holy » and therefore unchangeable. Moral authorities keep their hands on the relationship between a couple. Specially young people stick to this belief which they only question after having had their own experiences. But the picture of the « safe » family keeps their energy occupied for years. The isolated status of women as soon as they become mothers does not enable them to participate in the public life so that they are especially marginalised in the time when the « cake » - good jobs, high income and prestige - is divided.
- In matriarchal societies – in contrast to the nuclear family concept - men are not educated and prepared for “the fight in the world outside”, but own an integrative thinking of relatedness in their political, economic and social creating. The patriarchal understanding of « maleness » as one of excessive focusing on wage work, high reputation and high income is not valid. Within the nuclear family instead the matricidal masculinity - like Freud said - is continuously replicated.

- We do have examples from the past when men e.g. in matriarchal times of Egypt were politically acting as kings or regents, but they never posed their own will - they were representing the will and decisions of the inside, the women (Wolf 2009). To be the representative was the classical role of matriarchal kings, this role was changed during patriarchalisation.
- « Matriarchal policy » says Heide Göttner-Abendroth “is imbedded in the structure of spirituality, art and science, it had – even though it has its own rules – outside of these no place.” (Göttner-Abendroth, 2006, 253). It is common and public as it is politics according to all members of the society.

In the end

In the beginning I started from the suffering of family life, and this suffering gives us a kind of guideline that change is needed. The pictures – until now not accomplished and widely not imaginable – are given to us by the new matriarchal studies and show us the possible way out of the dilemma.

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