Doctoral dissertation

[THESES]

KOVÁCS BEÁTA

The fearful right and the brave left? About the
ideological dimensions of fear

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1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

As a result of global political events and social changes, both on a personal and societal level, we can think that fear-inducing events have multiplied, and seeing the world as something terrifying and dangerous has grown into a kind of worldview. Looking at this phenomenon from a macro perspective, we can even talk about the culture of fear, which has been an object of increasing social scientific interest since the 2000s (Füredi, 1997; Glassner, 1999; Altheide, 2002), and has also entered the field of political science (Füredi, 2005, 2017; Wodak, 2015).

The main objectives of this dissertation are suitable for filling gaps in scientific literature at two different but connected points. The first goal of my doctoral research is to explore the right and left dimensions of the phenomenon of fear. The studies that have examined political fears have mostly linked fear to conservativism (Jost et al, 2006, 2003a, 2003b; Altemeyer, 1998; Kanai et al, 2011) and right-wing populism (Wodak, 2015; Inglehart – Norris, 2016; Kinnvall, 2013), while the fears of the left have generated far less scientific interest. On the other hand, the dissertation seeks to analyse the relationship between ideological identity and fear. The Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions (Stets - Trettevik, 2014) indicates that the main direction for future investigations in connection with identities is that scholars shall examine not only emotions experienced in specific moments of time, but long-term emotional states including specific negative emotions such as fear.

The questions of the dissertation are also closely related to the discourse of identity politics that is one of the hot topics of contemporary social sciences (Zenovitz-Kollár, 2023; Fukuyama, 2018; Mouffe, 2011; Huntington, 2004). In addition the purpose of the research is to attempt a more systematic and empirical interpretation of the phenomenon of fear through the lenses of political science. It does all this by examining fears related to the refugee crisis and climate change which have now become part of our everyday life and which require an interdisciplinary approach to a great extent.

Since most research on fear and identity has been conducted using quantitative methods in the American political context, my dissertation aims to use qualitative methods to explore differences and similarities between the political fears and ideological identities of left-wingers and right-wingers in Hungary. In the course of the research sixty-nine semi-structured creative interviews were conducted with political activists. The interview questions were combined with projective techniques and the activists belonged to political parties which were members of the Hungarian Parliament.

The research questions are organized around three larger units. 1.) The first group of questions examines specific political fears (migration-related fears, climate anxiety and other (political) fears). 2.) The second group of questions works with a comparative approach asking how right- and left-leaning informants think and feel, what differences and similarities can be found at different points of the political spectrum. 3.) Finally, the third group of questions includes the theoretical aspect of the research, so it is primarily interested in how identity formation mechanism works, in addition, it also seeks to understand the nature of fear.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Right-wing and left-wing fears	
Specific fears	**Migration:** *What (fear)-narratives related to migration can be recognized in what the informants say?*
	Climate: *What (fear)-narratives related to climate change can be recognized in what the informants say?*
	What other fears can be recognized in what the informants say?
Comparative approach	**Similarity:** *What are the common elements of fear that are present in the thinking of informants regardless of ideological position?*
	Difference: *What are the emotional structures that are more likely to be identified as right-wing/ left-wing traits?*
Theoretical aspect	**Ideological identity:** *How does fear become part of the informants' ideological identity?*
	Nature of fear: *To what extent does fear appear as a social construction, and to what extent can fear be considered as a basic emotion based on what the informants say?*

The structure of the dissertation is as follows. The first chapter seeks to explain the theoretical background of the research. First, it introduces emotions as a social and political phenomenon and then it attempts to find the place of fear in the interdisciplinary literature. It

discusses the universal nature of fear, presents its mechanisms at the individual and societal level, and then it also addresses its identity-forming role. Furthermore, the chapter presents the emotional dimension of political identities through classical political theoretical and social psychology approaches, and then it points out the political significance of fear with the help of ideological identities (left/right, conservative/liberal). Finally, it illustrates ideological differences through two specific types of political fear, i.e. climate anxiety and migration-related fears. The theoretical chapter ends with conclusions. The second chapter introduces Hungarian political context by presenting the ideological and fear map of Hungary. The third chapter explains in detail the methodological approach and tools of the dissertation, as well as clarifies the most important conditions of the implementation of the empirical research. The fourth chapter includes the empirical results of the dissertation. First, it presents (fear)-narratives related to migration crisis and climate change and then it discusses what other types of (political) fear are present in what the informants say. After that, the chapter introduces the empirical results on identity and ideology, scrutinizes the images depicting politicians, draws some methodological conclusions, and finally answers the research questions. The dissertation ends with conclusions.

2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN

One of the principles of the research is that it places great emphasis on the knowledge perceived by our emotions. Because emotions can be an important part of how we understand the world, they can perform the same signalling function as our senses, that is, they help us decide what is real and what is not (Hubbard et al, 2001). Emotions therefore have an indisputable epistemological importance, since they play an indispensable role in the way we know and perceive the world, so in this sense, they have a central place in the research process.

In any case, the study of emotions is considered a slippery slope, since the researcher relates to the object of their research with an emotional attachment (Crawford, 2000:18). Our emotions are inherently temporary, and this gives rise to serious methodological concerns, as it is very difficult to isolate them. Overall, the world of emotions can seem like a very chaotic area, since feelings are difficult to quantify, label, define and operationalize, so their measurement can also encounter serious problems (Mercer, 1996).

I tried to keep the above in mind when I designed the method of my doctoral research. In the course of the research, I combined the interview questions with projective techniques (Will - MacAskill, 1996), and I conducted so-called creative interviews. The essence of creative interviewing is that it aims to reveal the deeper experience of the respondents emphasizing feeling and emotion. For the sake of the former one must go beyond the traditional, rational approach and perceive the research process as creatively as possible (Gubrium - Holstein, 2013;

Kara, 2017.) This method is therefore suitable for revealing what subjective meaning individuals give to the object of the research, i.e. what kind of emotional structure surrounds the phenomenon of migration and climate change; what narratives are connected to these concepts, and then how these narratives are imbued with cultural meanings.

During the practical implementation, the interview questions were followed by the presentation of visual material (see Appendix 3), which was potentially suitable for evoking left- and right-wing fears. The target group of the interviews was political activists and politicians, as I assumed that in their case politically relevant fears and emotions emerge more clearly. Before the interview process, I recorded three pilot interviews to test the interview questions. After that, I conducted a total of sixty-nine interviews, and since one of them was a paired interview, I ended up with seventy interviewees. Some of the interviews were conducted online (31) and some in person (38). The interviews were recorded in two waves. The first wave covered the period from May 2020 to September 2020, and the second wave took place from May 2022 to July 2022.

To transcribe the audio recordings, I used the Alrite software, which is an artificial intelligence-based speech recognition system. This made it easier to take ethical considerations into account since in this way there was no need to involve a third party in the process, what was said during the interview remained between me and the interviewee. To process the transcripts, I used the text analysis software MAXQDA, with the help of which I performed a qualitative content analysis.

3. MAIN FINDINGS OF THE DISSERTATION

1.) MIGRATION NARRATIVE=FEAR-NARRATIVE?

The migration narrative is based on two different emotional structures. The first draws attention to dangers and mainly plays on fears based on perceived or real cultural differences. This cultural dimension dominated the stories of the informants, regardless of party affiliation or ideological orientation, and appeared most often as a problem. The main difference between right-wingers and left-wingers was that, while pro-government respondents and informants from the right side of the ideological spectrum could not imagine that different cultures could peacefully coexist, leftists did not think this challenge was necessarily insurmountable. The second emotional structure rests on the moral dimension of care. The vast majority of the informants expressed sympathy and regret for the refugees and also declared that it is our human duty to help them in some way. The dimension of care appeared more prominently among left-leaning informants, but at the same time, the number of interviews where this aspect did not emerge at all is negligible.

2.) POLICY NARRATIVE WITH LIFESTYLE ELEMENTS

There was a complete consensus among informants that climate change is one of the most important challenges of our time, but greater emotional involvement did not characterize the respondents. The informants did not want to appear ignorant in the eyes of the interviewer, that is, because of the current and acute nature of the topic, they tried to show that they were knowledgeable about green issues, so a real policy narrative unfolded during the interviews. The most important difference between government supporters and the opposition was that Fidesz supporters (and the right-wing ones as well, only less characteristically) were more likely to express a negative opinion about green politics/green activism, which often crystallized into a lifestyle criticism (wild vegans). In addition, although climate anxiety is not a dominant emotion, it is nonetheless present in the examined group. Climate anxiety received a total of thirteen independent mentions in the first half of the interview. However, it is important to emphasize that green identity does not necessarily involve climate anxiety. In addition, climate fears mostly stand on their own, no real (emotional) narrative is built on them, and as a result, climate anxiety appeared more on the individual level and rarely became an emotion constructed by politics.

3.) OTHER FEARS

I summarize other types of fears that appear in the empirical material in the table below:

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF OTHER TYPES OF FEAR

FEARS		
	Pro-government	**Oppositional**
POLITICAL	Ideological fears	• Dictatorship • Polarization tendencies • Opposition politics
	Right-wing	**Left-wing**
		Social dimension
PERSONAL	• Family-related fears • Early life crisis • General insecurity • Fear of death	

POLITICAL AND PERSONAL	• Loss of job	
	Pro-government	**Oppositional**
		• Fear of political attacks • Concerns arising from the difficulties of being a politician • Weakness of the health care and social services system
	Right-wing	**Left-wing**
	Anthropological pessimism	
	• Fear of war	

The first important finding is that while political fears are divided, personal fears are more universal based on the empirical material. Personal fears have a private nature and are thus primarily organized around family. The second essential finding is that, in terms of political fears, we cannot primarily distinguish right-wing and left-wing fears, but rather opposition and pro-government fears. The Hungarian political context thus leaves its mark on the ideological fault lines, and the most dominant political fears (dictatorial fears and ideological fears) are thus organized around the perception of the Orbán regime. However, this does not mean that right-wing and left-wing fears do not exist in the Hungarian political context. While left-wing fears are not very characteristic (e.g. social dimension, climate anxiety), right-wing fears are currently owned by the ruling party. The right-wing concerns are organized on the basis of (party) identity and are connected to a broader identity discourse that is also present at the international level.

4.) FEAR AND IDEOLOGICAL IDENTITY

Although the identity formation process involves the dimension of fear by its nature, these fears do not automatically appear in the sphere of politics, and not all political fears are specifically organized around identities. For identity and fear to be more closely intertwined, a kind of political driver is needed, which can be created by using and developing the most suitable ideology. These mechanisms are perfectly visible among pro-government informants. Based on the empirical results, it turned out that Fidesz supporters were the most ideological because in their case the three examined dimensions (ideology, identity, fears) are completely connected, in

addition, the personal and political are also strongly linked since conservatism enters the sphere of private life. The integration of the personal and the political is primarily manifested in the concept of family. For pro-government informants, family is an essential component. Fidesz is the only party where the term family appears on all three levels: it is present in the aspect of fears (not being able to start a family), in addition, it also pops up in the case of identity and ideology, weaving through the interviews.

5.) NATURE OF FEAR

Since the examined emotions are always determined by social, political and cultural context, they can never be primary in the sense that the primitive man encountered them in the wilderness, thus they lost their basic emotional character. Although the emotions examined in the thesis are influenced by many factors, there are huge differences between the degrees of their construction. Every political emotion is a constructed emotion, but it does matter, if there is an intention to put them on the political agenda. The concept of construction is neutral in itself. Everything exists in certain social and political frameworks, so a significant part of human feelings only acquire their true meaning when embedded in a social context (Kemper, 1987, 2011). When politics deliberately begins to construct an emotion, it does not mean that it creates a feeling from nothing, but that it raises an already present emotion to a higher level of construction. In this process, ideologies play a prominent role, as they work like a political driver, harmonizing seemingly incoherent pieces of reality.

4. NOVELTY OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of the research was to attempt a more systematic and empirical interpretation of the phenomenon of fear through the lenses of political science. The dissertation adds to a very under-researched field in Hungary by using innovative methods, so the results of the dissertation could be used in more than one aspect of social science research.

The primary question of the research was to what extent we can talk about right-wing and left-wing fears, and what the fundamental differences and similarities are between the emotional dimensions of ideological identities. Emphasizing the emotional aspect would be an innovative step in itself, however, placing the examined phenomenon in a broader context, the results contributed to the understanding of the nature of fear (basic emotion vs. constructed nature), too. In addition, although it is a well-known fact that fear and (political) identity are organically connected, this connection has been unexplored at the level of mechanisms. The dissertation did an exploratory work in this area as well, and the empirical results made the above-mentioned mechanisms more tangible and visible.

Secondly, the practical benefit of the dissertation is to help us understand current Hungarian social phenomena. First of all, the research nuanced our knowledge of migration fears and climate anxiety in a qualitative sense. In addition, it formed an image of other, politically relevant types of fears as well. On the other hand, the empirical results gave insight into the political thinking of the informants, as well as showed how they defined their (political) identity.

Thirdly, the research also shows how ideology works in practice. One of the most important conclusions of the dissertation is that ideology is perhaps more important in Hungarian politics than we might think at first and that it is also present in our everyday life. The empirical results of the dissertation proved that differences between leftists and rightists have not faded, but the Hungarian right, both in its fears and in the aspect of ideology and identity much more characterful than the left.

Fourthly, the dissertation included method development as well, since it applied qualitative methodology in a field that traditionally relies more on statistical models. In addition, the application of projective techniques is not exactly common in Hungarian political science, thus, the dissertation contributed to their better use and understanding, and it did all this in a new scientific and cultural environment.

Finally, there is an important conclusion that goes beyond the research questions, that is the *paradox of political polarization*. The high level of partisan and emotional polarization was reflected as fear in what the informants said, while the topics (migration, climate change) examined by the research showed a much less polarized image. Social scientists can distinguish between different types of polarization, however from a layman's point of view, the term is problematic, because it reinforces the idea that no common denominator can be found between the opposition and the government. As a qualitative researcher, I believe that it might be worthwhile to explore the content issues of polarization more thoroughly, possibly to refine the scope of the question in a qualitative way as well.

5. SCIENTIFIC SCHOLARSHIPS, CONFERENCE LECTURES AND PUBLICATIONS OF THE AUTHOR CONNECTED TO THE DISSERTATION

SCIENTIFIC SCHOLARSHIPS:

Doctoral Research Fellowship (2023-2024)
Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Hungarian Eötvös State Scholarship (2023)
Panteion University, Athens, Greece

New National Excellence Program (2018/2019; 2022/ 2023; 2023/2024)

Erasmus Scholarship

2021.

National Centre for Social Research (EKKE), Athens, Greece

2022.

ENA Institute for Alternative Policies, Athens, Greece

Publication Scholarship in the Institute for Political Science, 1st prize (2019)

PUBLICATIONS:

Kovács, Beáta: „(…) nem biztos, hogy lennél ő, de azért örülsz, hogy ismered (…)."Eltérő magyarság-képek a parlamenti pártok aktivistáinak körében (2024). REGIO. hu (Megjelenés alatt).

Kovács, Beáta: A migránsok és az elvadult vegánok. Migrációs félelmek és klímaszorongás a parlamenti pártok aktivistáinak körében (2024). Socio.hu 14 (1): 51-86.

Kovács, Beáta: A politikai félelmek jobb-és baloldali dimenzióiról (2023). Metszetek 12 (4): 74-111.

Kovács, Beáta: Fear and securitisation (2022). In: Simon, Zoltán – Ziegler, Tamás Dezső (eds.): European Politics. Crises, fears, and debates. Budapest: L'Harmattan.

Kovács, Beáta: Τα πολιτικά συναισθήματα των νέων: Η περίπτωση της Ουγγαρίας (2022). Δελτίο Πολιτικής Συγκυρίας #04 | Νεολαία & πολιτική στην Ελλάδα σήμερα, ENA Institute.

Kovács, Beáta: Félek, tehát vagyok. Félelem mint politikai identitás (2020). Politikatudományi Szemle 29 (3): 7-31.

Kovács, Beáta: „(…) mindenki külföldre fog menni vagy messzebb." (E)migrációs félelmek Ózd városában (2020). Socio.hu. 10 (2): 27-52.

Kovács, Beáta: " Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) Emotions, Media and Politics. Cambridge: Polity Press. 220 pages."(2020). Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics [Online], 6 (2): 99-102.

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Annual Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association (2024).Title of the lecture: The fearful right and the brave left? About the ideological dimensions of fear.

48th Annual Conference of the American Hungarian Educators Association (2024).Title of the lecture: The fearful right and the brave left? About the ideological dimensions of fear.

University of Alberta: Central European Talks (2024). Title of the lecture: The Hungarian Patient. Different images of the Hungarian identity among political activists.

XXVII. Annual Conference of the Hungarian Political Science Association (2023). Title of the lecture: About political fears from the left and the right.

XXVII. Annual Conference of the Hungarian Political Science Association (2022). Title of the lecture: The fearful right and the brave left? About the ideological dimensions of fear.

'Who cares about Sociology? Is it possible to respond to the crises of our time with Sociology?' Conference of the Institute for Sociology, 2022. Title of the lecture: The fearful right and the brave left? About the ideological dimensions of fear.

'Sociology at the Dawn of a Successful Century' Conference of the Institute for Sociology, 2022. Title of the lecture: Beyond borders. Fears concerning migration and emigration in the city of Ózd.

ECPR General Conference (2020). Title of the lecture: I fear, hence I am. Fear as Political Identity.

VII. Conflicting Points Conference (2020). Title of the lecture: Beyond borders. Fears concerning migration and emigration in the city of Ózd.

V. Conference for Doctoral Students of Political Science (2019). Title of the lecture: Beyond borders. Fears concerning migration and emigration in the city of Ózd.

XXV. Annual Conference of the Hungarian Political Science Association (2022). Title of the lecture: I fear, hence I am. Fear as Political Identity.

VI. Conflicting Points Conference (2020). Title of the lecture: I fear, hence I am. Fear as Political Identity.

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