

The Fathers' Rights Movement as a Subaltern Counterpublic¹

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The Fathers' Rights Movement as a Subaltern Counterpublic. According to Nancy Fraser, some formal members of the public sphere tend to be informally marginalized and consequently form "subaltern counterpublics". This article applies the concept of subaltern counterpublics to the Czech fathers' rights movement, where members of the movement believe they are discriminated in their parental rights and pushed out of the debate in the public sphere. In spite of being individuals who have represented the traditional hegemony of the public sphere, they have created their own counterpublics in order to assert their interests.

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Introduction

According to Nancy Fraser (1990), the public sphere, in accordance with liberal political theory a sphere of equality, is actually controlled by the traditional hegemon - that is educated, white, middle-aged men. The rest of its members and groups do not have an equal position: their voice is often not heard, thus they need to create their own spaces, so-called "subaltern counterpublics". Within these, they define the discourse with which they intervene in the hegemonic public sphere. For Fraser, typical examples of subaltern counterpublics are groups striving for female emancipation. As their voices grow stronger, the voice of the current hegemon begins to lose strength. Thus, the number of men feeling discriminated in certain aspects of their life is increasing: according to researches, this feeling of discrimination is most frequently related to post-separation disputes over children. (For the Czech society, see e.g. Podoby otcovství 2010)

The work demonstrates how, given the situation, the current hegemon resorts to practices that are typical, according to Fraser, for marginalized groups and creates its own counterpublic. In this context, the work deals with current discourses related to fatherhood (including the Czech society), analyses texts published on Czech pro-fathers websites and searches for a correspondence between Fraser's theory of subaltern counterpublics and the tactics of the fathers' rights movement (hereinafter FRM or FR).

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A critical analysis of the liberal-bourgeois construction of the public sphere

Fraser subjects the liberal-bourgeois model of the public sphere to critical analysis as it is based on the idea that private persons rationally and without restraint discuss matters of public concern or common interest. Fraser points out that this model has been historically constituted in a network of closed philanthropic, professional, or cultural clubs – a network that was “anything but accessible to everyone.” It was “the power base” of bourgeois men, who saw themselves as a “universal class”. (Fraser 1990: 60) These men, high-ranking in the economic, intellectual and administrative hierarchy, were bearers of specific manners of verbal expression and thinking. (Habermas 1991: 22-23) Those individuals unable or unwilling to be trained in such manners and those who were banned access to the training were informally excluded from the public sphere even after it was formally opened up in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Young argues (1996: 123), a modern political debate has certain “rules, and rhetorical and cultural styles” that determine “the very conceptions of reason and deliberation” and are anchored in the idea of academic, parliamentary and judicial debate. The norms of a public sphere debate “often operate as forms of power that silence or devalue the speech of some people”. (Young 1996: 123) The presumption that the discussion within the public sphere is “open and accessible to all; merely private interests (are) inadmissible; inequalities of status (are) bracketed; and discussants (...) deliberate as peers” is naive and contributes to the exclusivity of the public sphere. (Fraser 1990: 65)

Although women and other marginalized groups were gradually admitted into the public sphere, they have not been viewed as its full-fledged participants as, measured by the traditional hegemonic discourse criteria, they were not able to “express their rationality and universality, abstracted from their particular situations and need, and opposed to feeling”. (Young 1987: 73) Not even “bracketing of social inequalities” would annihilate this disproportion as members of social layers and groups, that have historically constituted the public sphere, often act from a position of authority, “whereas those of other groups often feel intimidated by the argument requirements” and formal rules of public discussion. This is why the newly admitted groups do not take part in the debate or, if they do, their way of doing so is considered disruptive. (Young 1996: 124) Adequate participation is thus only illusory and “the appeal to a common good in which they are all supposed to leave behind their particular experience and interests” may lead to a situation in which “the less privileged are asked to put aside the expression of their experience” and their claims “must be put aside for the sake of a common good,” that is defined by the

privileged. (Young 1996: 126) In such a setting, “deliberation can serve as a mask for domination” (Fraser 1990: 64) since subordinate groups, such as women or the plebeian strata, “sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard”. (Mansbridge, quoted from Fraser 1990: 64) The latter is yet another circumstance often neglected in rationalistic constructions of the liberal-bourgeois public sphere: “One must also be heard (...), democratic theorists value speaking, but they less often discuss listening”. (Young 1996: 130) It is therefore not sufficient to merely reduce economic and political inequalities but also inequalities resulting from stereotypes, i.e. all symbolic power that grants the actors in the public sphere the informal right to speak out and be heard. Such an objective, however, is impossible to fully achieve in reality.

With regards to the following analysis, there are two major forms of exclusion to be dealt with. The first is marginalisation through “discursive protocols” or “protocols of style and decorum”. Discursive protocols in the public sphere incline to such forms of expression which are formal and general, eliminating those perceived as too emotional. Consequently, emotions and feelings, whether positive or negative, whether in terms of words or body language (more pronounced gestures or mimic), are interpreted as “signs of weakness that (...) reveal one’s lack of objectivity and control” and the incapacity to present rational arguments. (Young 1996: 124) Respective problems then remain unaddressed as they are presented too “subjectively” and thus denounced as private problems, not worthy of a public debate and unrelated to the common good. This is the result of the second form of exclusion, this time rooted in the distinction between the public and the private, wherein issues and claims labelled within a particular discourse as private are closed out from the public debate.

The liberal-bourgeois public space has been historically constituted around “gender norms enjoining feminine domesticity and a sharp separation of public and private spheres”. (Fraser 1990: 60) This distinction between the public and the private sphere has thus become a pillar of exclusion, with men associated with the former and women with the latter. As a result, women were either excluded from the public debate or were not allowed to address issues considered private. This is not to suggest that all private interests were disqualified from public debate. As far as economic interests in the liberal sense are concerned (that is interests in individual economic gain arising from legal entrepreneurship), these are viewed as legitimate and are allowed to be articulated within public debate. Thus, concerns connected to private property in the market economy were traditionally part of public debate while those “pertaining to intimate domestic or personal life” have historically been subject to exclusion from the debate. (Fraser 1990: 71)

Certain problems were therefore discussed solely in specialized discursive arenas and were closed out from the general public debate. "If wife battering, for example, is labelled a 'personal' or 'domestic' matter and if public discourse about this phenomenon is canalized into specialized institutions associated with, say, family law, social work, and the sociology and psychology of 'deviance', then this serves to reproduce gender dominance and subordination". (Fraser 1990: 72) This perception began to change, however, under the influence of the feminist subaltern counterpublics as they effectively disseminated "a view of domestic violence as a widespread systemic feature of male-dominated societies." Finally, "after sustained discursive contestation", feminism succeeded "in making it a common concern". (Fraser 1990: 71)

The influence of subaltern counterpublics on the public sphere is one of the central ideas of Fraser's work. Subaltern counterpublics disrupt the hegemonic and homogeneous forms of the liberal-bourgeois public sphere. They are diverse associations founded by women, workers and groups with limited access to power that define themselves on the basis of ethnicity, language, religion, later also on the basis of sexual orientation and the like. Fraser (1990: 67) uses the term subaltern counterpublics "in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." She presents as an example the feminist subaltern counterpublic, composed of informal groups, lecture series, festivals etc. In these spaces "feminist women have invented new terms for describing social reality, including 'sexism', 'the double shift', 'sexual harassment'" etc. (Fraser 1990: 67) This is how, for example, sexual harassment was redefined from innocent flirting of a private character to "abuse of power and an instrument of domination and matter of common concern and thus a legitimate topic for public deliberation". (Fraser 1995: 293)

Fraser also avoids any idealisation of subaltern counterpublics, pointing out that some of them are "explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian". However, since "these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space". (Fraser 1990: 67) This point is crucial for the purpose of the following analysis of the FRM. In order to understand the claims of the FRM in a more general context, the father role in contemporary society will be examined first.

Contemporary fatherhood

Fatherhood is an ambiguous notion at present with, on the one hand, a still dominating discourse that privileges "the traditional idea of the father as provider", and, at the same time, the rise of "the idea of the father as an

emotionally involved ‘hands-on’ parent”. (Collier 2001: 531) Thus, fathers are encouraged to spend more and more time with their children, yet, in the period after birth, are forced to work more to live up to the provider’s role and therefore cannot spend as much time with their family as before. (Křížková – Vohlídalová 2009) Despite the ever more pronounced claims for active fatherhood, men are therefore often uncertain in defining their role as active fathers.

Although contemporary publications aimed at parents, written by experts in the field, agree that fathers are competent to care for children, this does not mean that they are considered completely equal parents in comparison with mothers in the public discourse. Society may still be assuring them that their care is not “considered essential to healthy development of their children”, as determined by Wall’s and Arnold’s analysis of the public discourse (2007: 523). In the current Czech media discourse, ideas which resonate strongly include, for instance, those of the activist Marek Herman, who opposes shared custody in the name of maternal care, as well as the idea of fathers on parental leave. (Herman 2017) He emphasizes “the natural” difference between parents of both sexes, where mothers are “affectionate” and fathers “strict”. In one interview, he agreed with a claim that a child raised in a family without a mother (or a woman) may have flaccid mimic muscles, as men raise children in a different way than women. (Herman – Hronová 2017) Absurd as his claims might sound, his emphasis on the irreplaceability of maternal care arouses a positive response from many recipients of the Czech media discourse, as can be seen in discussions and polls following his articles on Czech news websites. The popular TV station Nova states, for example, on its website: “Mothers are moved by Marek Herman. His opinions full of respect and admiration towards mums, considered by him the most important members of any family, brought tears even to the eyes of the female moderator of the show *Maminy s rozumem* (Mums with sense).” (Nova n.d.) This stereotypical view of mothers and fathers prevails in Czech society, as is documented by the results of the recent Eurobarometer survey (2017: 7).

In such a context, how the father role is performed is often dependent on the mothers who are considered natural experts on childrearing. If the agreement between parents concerning parenting is weak, the mothers prevailed more, and the fathers are less involved. (McBride – Rane 1998) Johansson and Klinth (2008: 12) have come to the conclusion that some fathers “thought that women sometimes create obstacles to men’s presence and that they help to create weak self-esteem in men by criticizing” them for the way they fulfil the role of a parent/carer. Such an attitude may be the result not only of the feeling that fathers are not fully competent in childcare, but also of the fact that “the new fatherhood ideology has led in practice to a devaluing of the social importance

of mothers”. (Collier 2001: 543) This is one of the reasons why some mothers try to apply strict standards to fathering and men who are not able or willing to live up to these standards are subject to criticism for their lack of skills – in scholarly literature, this attitude is called “maternal gatekeeping”. (Dudová 2008: 197) In such a setting, the father performs only activities selected by the mother and it is the mother who decides whether these have been performed properly.

In this respect, fatherhood is much less socially supported than motherhood and if the parents are separated, the father is under the threat of turning into a peripheral father. According to statistics, the number of separations of couples with children is on the rise and in the Czech Republic, most lawsuits end up with exclusive custody awarded to the mother: in 2016 the proportion was 79 % of the cases. (Zaostřeno 2017) The fathers consequently experience intense post-separation dependence on the mothers when their father role is concerned. In many cases it is still therefore valid that “a woman is a mother all of her life, but a man is a father if he has a wife” (Doherty et al. 1998: 286) since the parent role is limited to a minor part in the lives of many fathers after separation. (Dudová 2008)

The above-mentioned phenomenon can also be viewed, among other things, as an echo of the situation in complete families: the fact that fathers spend more time with their children these days does not imply that childcare is distributed equally between parents. “Men’s child orientation is more a question of their ‘picking out the good bits’ than of a radical transformation of masculinity. (...) There is a tendency for men to participate in the ‘fun’ aspects of parenthood, while women are in charge of the rest”. (Johansson – Klinth 2008: 19) Fathers contribute to the everyday care much less than mothers – a fact that, in the case of parents’ separation, to many mothers, social workers and judges, legitimizes the decision to permit the father to spend less time with his children since it is not considered a major change from the state of affairs before the separation. This leads to so-called weekend fatherhood: the father becomes less of a person who provides care and education and more of a leisure activity animator (Dudová 2008) – as one father said, he feels more like “playground staff” than a father. (Kozelka 2016)

In their analysis of popular articles on childcare, Wall and Arnold (2007: 522) have come to the conclusion that “the importance of father involvement in the lives of young children does not emerge as an issue” and this idea is widely shared by the Czech public – see the above-mentioned results of the Eurobarometer survey (2017), suggesting that Czech society is one of the most traditional ones in the EU with regard to the perception of motherhood and fatherhood. Those who identify with this view consequently see no reasons to support the case of enlarging fathers’ rights unless the mother agrees.

Furthermore, even unsubstantiated or groundless suspicion of the negative father's influence may lead to limiting contact between the father and the child. As a result, certain theorists deem it important to emphasize the need for more social support of fatherhood as "fathers' parenting suffers disproportionately from negative social forces". (Doherty et al. 2000: 573) According to Castelain-Meunier (2002: 198), "There is an illusion that father and mother (...) are on equal terms with one another. We thus face a kind of egalitarian fraud that appears in childrearing (withdrawal of the father) and in situations of conflict (marginalization of some fathers). It is as though an unacknowledged matricentrism exists, although society is dominated by men." Since fatherhood is most at risk after the separation of parents, Castelain-Meunier (2002: 192) considers it crucial to focus on processes "assigning custody and visiting rights in the case of separation."

The above-mentioned is a description of the ideological context of the FRM: on the one hand, they object to the marginal social support of their claims, yet their members rank among typical representatives of privileged strata. In most cases they are educated, heterosexual, middle-aged white men – in the case of the Czech society, this fact is confirmed by Saxonberg's analysis (2017). Even if FR organizations attempt to form a space for their subaltern counterpublic with its specific counterdiscourses, their members are prototypical representatives of the traditional liberal-bourgeois public sphere. They are by no means social strata and groups producing typical members of the Fraserian subaltern counterpublics. It is therefore assumed that they have at their disposal sufficient tools for reaching their objectives.

The ideology of the fathers' rights movement

As Fraser points out, the feminist movement has been relatively successful from the second half of the twentieth century, at least on the discursive level, and the Euro-American public has gradually recognized that society advantages men and marginalizes women. As early as the 1970s, however, the men's movement launched efforts to undermine this assertion. Pleck speaks in 1974 about a paradoxical reality in patriarchal societies, where men hold institutional power, but most men do not feel very powerful (Messner 1998: 260) and the emerging men's and fathers' movement began to attack the women's emancipation movement. According to these movements, men are "emotionally and sexually manipulated by women, forced into provider roles (...), kept from equal participation and power in family life, and finally dumped by wives only to have courts and lawyers give all the property, money, and child custody to the women". (Kimmel 1987: 278-279) This may be illustrated by the claim of one of the representatives of the FRM, Gregory: "Practically everything that is wrong with the country: crime, drugs, teenage pregnancy (...) is a direct result

of the Women's Revolution. Why? (...) the primary cause for crime is broken families. And the primary cause of broken families is the women's movement". (Quoted from Williams – Williams 1995: 205) Research shows, however, that the viewpoint of FRM representatives is one-sided. According to Dragiewicz (2008: 133), "Some men perceive their loss of control as 'sexism' precisely because they are accustomed to patriarchal power relations within their families." Despite gender equality on their agenda (as is the case in the debate on shared custody), activists of FRM are accused by critics of simply trying to attain "the maintenance of patriarchal families even after divorce". (Dragiewicz 2008: 130) Dudová (2008) confirms the existence of such fathers: they are men believing in natural differences between sexes and male superiority (165-167), who want to control the upbringing of children even after the separation of the couple and thus maintain the position of the head of the family (129). In research interviews on the topic of fatherhood, these men did not talk all that much about their children and caring for them as they criticized their ex-partners, courts and state institutions who had, from their point of view, the main responsibility for the fact that they cannot participate in childrearing to their liking. According to Saxonberg's (2017: 206) analysis, these men feel shame and anger – not, however, because of losing contact with their children due to separation, but because of losing the socially highly esteemed status of a "successful family man".

Dragiewicz (2008) makes mention of Stephen Baskerville, former president of the American Coalition for Fathers and Children, among the most important proponents of this manner of argumentation. His texts are often referred to by representatives of the Czech FRM. His work "The Dangerous Rise of Sexual Politics" was published in Czech a number of times, different translations can be found on the websites of the organisation Střídavka (a colloquial term for shared custody) (Baskerville 2010) and Spravedlnost dětem. (Justice for Children, Baskerville n.d.) The text was also published by Blesk pro muže (a men's supplement to the tabloid Blesk often advocating fathers' rights ideology). Additional texts by Baskerville are quoted by another Czech FR organisation K213. An overview follows of the central ideas advocated in Baskerville's text, popular in the Czech FR discourse, as well as the arguments published by the above-mentioned Czech FR groups.

The Dangerous Rise of Sexual Politics

Baskerville (2008) speaks of "sexual ideology" that is rooted in "radical feminism" and brings about the "erosion of (...) privacy, as well as the politicization of personal life." He believes that society has taken a path of injustice, with women profiting over men in holding power over children through "the world of social work, child psychology, child and family

counselling, child care, child protection, child support enforcement, and juvenile and family courts.” According to Baskerville, women’s power further grows due to organized after-school activities the purpose of which is “to relieve parents in general and mothers in particular of childrearing duties.” He states that society contributes to the “divorce culture” as it makes life easier for single mothers, boosting the marginalization of fathers and encouraging the concept of family as a useless value. Another tool of father discrimination is, according to Baskerville, the notion of “the deadbeat dad” produced by “the divorce machinery”. He rejects this notion, arguing that current fathers, who do not live with their children, mostly do not fit into the definition of men who “voluntarily abandoned the offspring they callously sired,” but more into that of an “involuntarily divorced father who has been forced to finance the filching of his own children.” All of this, according to Baskerville, has important effects for society as a whole. Along with Gregory, he believes that “the explosion of crime, addiction, and truancy” results from children not being raised in complete families, a tendency he denounces as “a deliberate product of the feminist revolution”, adding massive rise of women employment to the list of negative consequences. Baskerville affirms that the social reality, as he perceives it, is not far from a totalitarian socio-political system and that it is directed primarily against men. He refers to one of the elementary defining characteristics of the totalitarian regime, which is the control of the state over the private sphere: family affairs and childrearing move under the control of state institutions dominated by the feminist “sexual ideology”. He then defines the protection of the private sphere from public institutions as one of the ways of hindering such tendencies.

This is the point where a major intellectual leader of the FRM becomes entangled in a trap of a logical paradox, at least when his theses are projected against the background of how fathers themselves view custody lawsuits. They constantly blame the courts and social care institutions for not taking action, which, in their opinion, is falsely explained by the institutions as an effort to avoid public exposure of private affairs. As a result, these fathers struggle to make courts and institutions more involved in the cases, to be more supportive of their causes and not to dismiss participation under the excuse of a disinclination to interfere in private disputes of partners undergoing separation. Furthermore, they attempt to turn their struggle into a political agenda, that is, they push for changes in the law that would bring about more support for fathers in divorce cases, claiming that the problem is not private but social.

Another noticeable discrepancy in Baskerville’s argumentation lies in his pleading for traditional family values, traditional fatherhood and traditional distribution of labour within families when the FRM calls for shared custody in the name of gender equality. Similarly, his complaints about the control of

women over institutions dealing with children neglect the fact that this is caused by transposition of the traditional gender distribution of labour from the private to the public sphere. These are the contours of the ideological paradox within which the FRM operates in general and also in particular in the case of the Czech FR groups. On the one hand, out of the pure logic of shared custody, these associations attempt to undermine gender stereotypes and prove that fathers are equal to mothers when childrearing is at stake. On the other hand, they explicitly assert that what they view as an ideal state of affairs is the traditional gender-based distribution of roles with fathers in control.

The Czech fathers' rights movement

The websites of Czech FR organizations include a wide variety of texts identifying ideologically with the claim of the equality of men and women, as well as with the conviction that men are superior to women. This demonstrates the non-embeddedness of Czech fathers' organizations and the attempt to, at least on the outside, maintain the appearance of ideological pluralism within their own discursive space.

The following analysis is not based on a representative quantitative selection of texts. In fact, articles from both edges of the opinion scale have been deliberately selected. A greater part of the work is then dedicated to texts advocating the natural difference between both sexes and the resulting superiority of men over women, as the main representatives of Czech FR groups identify with these claims in their public appearances (see the attitudes of Aleš Hodina and Valentin Papazian mentioned later).

A typical text referring to the traditional, and therefore "natural", distribution of sex roles is Jindřich Brož' article "Feminism: an ideology leading to totalitarianism" published on the website of the FR association Strídavka. The author asserts that women are "more attached to family" and "more emphatic," while men's characteristics are "strength, aggressiveness, decisiveness." Brož views these features as biologically given and permanent: "Each female feature is a product of natural evolution directly connected to women's specialization; in general, women cannot be as aggressive as men since excessive aggressiveness among women would lead to a threat to the tribe in the form of a lack of pregnant women. In contrast, an excessive caring instinct with men-hunters would undermine the capacity to protect and kill, leading to another form of threat". (Brož 2013a) Brož then concludes: "Women are indeed more attached to family and children (...). Men, on the other hand, are more active without the boundaries of the 'nest'. This is the natural state of affairs, a result of evolution". (Brož 2014)

Similar arguments are to be found in a text by Josef Staňek (n.d.) entitled "Who is killing manhood in the Czech Republic", published on the website of

the organisation Justice to Children. The author presents the following idea: “Unlike sick contemporary western society, tribes living according to natural laws have understood that in order to win over the forces of nature, they need to accept the differentiated body of sufferings and pains that are distributed between sexes. (...) For them, the focal point of female hardship has revolved around menstruation, labour, childrearing and chores. On the other hand, male hardship and pain result from the man’s role as a protector of territory, fighting with predators and natural forces, with the danger and toil associated with providing necessary materials.” The author then condemns contemporary western society, since “this deteriorating society provides no space whatsoever for men to perform the role of the head of family (...), biologically programmed in their subconscious!”

Although the declared objective of the organisations Střídavka, Justice for Children and Unie otců (The Fathers’ Union) is shared custody, the texts they publish permanently question the capacity of fathers to rear children. Terms such as “active fatherhood” are used in quite different meanings than that referred to by authors emphasizing the importance of caring fatherhood. The website of Střídavka published an article entitled “Let’s promote active fatherhood: there are benefits not only for children”. (Mečíř 2014) The author argues, and this standpoint is fully in accordance with the ideas of proponents of gender equality, that “it is active fatherhood that can help not only children but also their parents.” Further in the text, however, instead of defining active fatherhood in relation to children, the author focuses on the behaviour of the mother, the father’s partner. The active father is one who fights “against psychological pressure” from his partner. He leads this fight “in all politeness” but “with all mighty vigour.” Furthermore, “if he considers the relationship worthy (...) he has to make a proposal to his partner” who, on the other hand, “is obliged to disclose to him all information about her income and the extent of her belongings.” Only in the very end, the author deals with fatherhood as such, claiming that “both the role of the father and the role of the mother are irreplaceable and must be executed in mutual harmony”. In effect, the author does not question gender stereotypes at all and his definition of active fatherhood is disconnected from the notion of father’s active childrearing.

Such texts perpetuate inequality between men and women. This is explicitly pronounced in the above quoted text by Brož: “Fishing, kettle breeding and animal hunting – all of that required a specific set of skills and expert knowledge and it is a fact that men were more successful in acquiring them. (...) The advent of agriculture enhanced this distinction (between men and women). All of a sudden, society was rich (...) and since it was mostly the male element that brought about the surplus production, men were gradually turning into owners of goods (...). This social group was based on private

property and such a society introduced a system of patrilineality since it was man who originally produced possessions”. (Brož 2013b) According to Brož, it justifies economic inequality between men and women as well as dependence of women on men.

These texts and statements openly attack women and feminists. Brož argues, for example, that “feminists strive to undermine our model of society, to deny its natural history and to replace natural norms with new feminist norms”. (Brož 2014) “Consequently, discrimination of the more apt (i.e. men) is installed, their starting lines are pushed behind, while the starting lines of the less apt (i.e. women) are pushed forward”. (Brož 2013c) In a similar fashion, Papazian (2014), president of the Father’s Union, declared: “The Fathers’ Union has nothing against women. We like women, we find them attractive but we are aware of their weaknesses. Women are not to rule over men. That brings destruction upon the entire civilization. (...) This is wisdom proved by millennia: Man, love your woman. Woman, listen to your man.” It does not therefore come as a surprise that, as part of the EU election campaign in 2014, Aleš Hodina (a representative of Střídavka) and Valentin Papazian signed a manifesto “Vote for the family!” in which they “recognize complementarity between men and women, and reject gender ideology which seeks to erase sexual differences in public policies”. (Vote... 2014)

At the same time, the pro-fathers websites also publish texts that abstain from the above quoted patriarchal bigotry, calling for gender equality and criticizing gender discrimination of fathers. The website of Střídavka has, for example, published an open letter to the children's magazine *Mateřidouška* (Thyme) in which the author draws attention to the fact that many articles in the magazine speak exclusively about mothers and never mention fathers. (Kapusta 2014) In another article published on the website, the author complains that if a father wants to accompany his child during a hospitalisation and the child is sharing a room with another child accompanied by a mother, the father needs the mother to agree with his presence. In contrast, the mother does not need permission from the father in order to be allowed in. This leads the author to ask the question why mothers have more parental rights than fathers. (Čermák 2014) The website of Justice for Children has also published an article with the telling title: “Maternal instinct is an anachronism: Daddies know their children quite well too”. (*Mateřský instinkt* 2018)

Domestic violence is another issue where the FRM tries to point out stereotypical views on men and women. The Facebook profiles of Střídavka and The Fathers’ Union recurrently share links to articles covering cases of women performing violence against their partners or children. To name one example, Střídavka re-posted a link to an article originally published on the website of the daily *Idnes* “Mother mixes an antifreeze formulation into

daughter's yoghurt. Girl saved by father". (FB Střídavka 2014) These organisations strive to convince the public that women are equally violent as men and that they commit domestic violence just as frequently, possibly even more than their male counterparts. On its Facebook profile, the Fathers' Union shared an article from the tabloid Blesk "Survey: More women commit domestic violence than men". (FB Unie otců 2012) Such arguments are weak, however, when viewed in the light of what was described above: these FR groups themselves refer to texts that insist that men are by nature more aggressive than women and that any effort to change it is a threat to human nature.

This mixture of standpoints, where advocacy of gender equality blends with dogmatic and bigoted defence of unalterable differences between the capacities of men and women as well as prioritizing the supposedly male character features, reveals a high degree of ambivalence and inconsistency that leads to confusion as to the objectives of the FRM on the whole. We can therefore wholeheartedly agree with Saxonberg's (2017: 212) analysis of Czech pro-father discussion groups, where the topic of "a dilemma for father" is addressed. "On the one hand, since they see 'feminists' as their enemy, they are not able to develop convincing arguments against the continuation of conservative gender roles, in which mothers are the primary carers. On the other hand, in order to argue for the right to shared custody they argue that they are just as good at raising their children as the mother is."

The fathers' rights movements and their position in society

This insistence on stereotypes is one of the reasons why proponents of the FRM fail to succeed in reaching their goals to the desired extent. Their claims are anchored in an ideological foundation which mixes diverse arguments, often unacceptable or incomprehensible to the general public, and which fails to comply with the rules imposed by the discursive protocols of the hegemonic public sphere. It is important to point out that these protocols are currently, to a greater extent than ever before, also constituted by pro-women organisations which originally formed subaltern counterpublics, only to later succeed and become involved in forming the public agenda and growing into an inherent part of the mainstream public sphere. (Fraser 1990) This is valid, for example, for Czech organisations concerned with domestic violence. A call for stronger positions in post-separation childrearing on the part of the FRM is often viewed as men's effort to prolong and enhance their abusive control over children and former partners (see e.g. Švecová 2009) and the aggressive rhetoric of the FRM promoting men's superiority helps support this standpoint of pro-women organisations.

The FRM often challenges those gender stereotypes, which are pillars of women social power: among them not only the belief that of the two sexes, women are more essential and competent as parents than men, but also the notion that women are less aggressive than men and therefore need social protection never accorded to men. The traditional belief that men are stronger and therefore non-eligible for protection equal to women is a major pitfall of fathers' causes. This might also be one of the reasons why certain strategies of advocacy are more successful with pro-women organizations than with fathers' rightists. To name one particular example, let us take a look at storytelling, a strategy of talking about a person's negative experience. Young (1996: 132) suggests that "storytelling complements arguments in a communicative democracy because it tends to be more egalitarian than typical deliberative processes." While "deliberation can privilege the dispassionate, the educated, or those who feel they have a right to assert," storytelling is different "because everyone has stories to tell, with different styles and meanings, and because each can tell her story with equal authority, the stories have equal value in the communicative situation." In the case of the feminist movement, this strategy has turned out to be very effective in changing public opinion: it is considered legitimate for women with a personal experience of domestic or sexual abuse to build their activism on their own personal experience (see e.g. the campaign #MeToo). In contrast, fathers speaking out about being deprived of fully-fledged contact with their children are not so frequently heard and their experience is often denounced as too subjective and particular. Furthermore, men are often accused of being responsible for their situation and charged of exaggeration and fabrication (a strategy used to belittle testimonies of women who were victims of abuse). A number of authors argue that fathers often base their claims on "anecdotal stories, combined with a few highly questionable studies that provided an emotionally charged basis for the development of an ideology of male victimization". (Messner 1998: 268) We are again dealing here with a traditional stereotype, this time (as opposed to most of the other cases) supporting the women's case: the stereotype of rational men and emotional women. This stereotype argues that storytelling is often the only tool to share the experience of injustice for women (as the more emotional), while men should express their experience in a rational manner and any emotional account should be discarded. Proof of this view can be found above in the use of "her" and the absence of "his" in Young's description of storytelling. In conclusion, storytelling is considered acceptable and understandable as a form of advocacy for the women's cause while it is seldom so when the men's cause is at stake.

One of the reasons for this is the fact that, based on gender-different socialization, men and women are taught to express in different ways their

emotions by which they subsequently enhance their stories: women in a positive way with tears, whereas men negatively with anger, causing fear. At the same time, according to Saxonberg (2017: 202), the concept of hegemonic masculinity is changing. It is no longer built on aggressive enforcement of one's own interests, but is more likely "the more moderate, conflict-avoiding" masculinity. Even the "protocols of style and decorum", accentuated and accepted in the public sphere, have been undergoing such a change. Saxonberg (2017: 198), in agreement with Fraser, remarks that those who "frame their arguments in a way that is culturally resonant (are) more likely to gain support." Aggressive emotions are thus counterproductive even for fathers who used to participate fully in childrearing before the separation and whose anger caused by the loss of contact with children after separation is understandable and cannot be dismissed with a claim that in fact they are not interested in their children. Gender stereotypes are so strong that even caring fathers may be granted only marginal contact with their children after separation. In her research, Dudová (2008: 100, 146, 177) encountered men who played the role of the primary carer at least for some time before the separation, but after that, not only were they unsuccessful with demanding shared custody, but in some cases were even effectively prevented from contact with their children by their mother, while the legally competent institutions were not able or willing to intervene against it effectively.

Therefore, women, unlike men, may benefit from the stereotype of the weak and emotional sex that needs protection – combined with the gradual empowerment of the women's voice in the public sphere as well as the presupposition anchored in traditional gender stereotypes that women are experts on the domestic sphere and childrearing. The result is that the voices of fathers are seen as too aggressive, subjective and disruptive, are not being heard in the public deliberation and are marginalized or even discriminated in divorce and post-separation cases. The Czech Constitutional Court has demonstrated a number of times that such instances occur. It insists in one of its judgments, for example, that courts cannot decide only upon the testimonies of mothers as such acting is "in conflict with the fundamental right of the other parent to a fair trial". (Constitutional Court 2009)

FR groups encompass a large spectrum of opinions. Even the ambivalence of their standpoints results from the fact that they link men with different views, with the main denominator not being ideological but personal. Discrimination in parenting rights can be felt by a responsible caring father as well as by a proponent of the patriarchal division of domestic labour. According to Fraser, this is a traditional feature of subaltern counterpublics: they encompass an extremely wide spectrum of diverse or even antagonist opinions through which they contribute (often as a side effect) to the

democratization and pluralisation of the public debate – although they may include even very strongly non-democratic rhetoric.

The fathers' movement may thus be seen as a subaltern counterpublic, which may eventually contribute to greater equality, although the representatives of this movement frequently argue in favour of superiority over women. An example may be the development of discussion platforms created by these men at least at the onset. Apart from still existing aggressive rhetoric against feminism and, in their words, "feminist" (that is feminized) institutions such as custody courts and agencies for social and legal protection of children (see Saxonberg 2017), substantive argumentation in favour of paternal childcare can be increasingly seen (often by new partners of divorced fathers) and efforts to resolve practical matters related to shared custody and to decision-making on the part of the institutions responsible – see for instance the content of the FB group "Střídavá péče" (Shared Custody), whose admin is active in the fathers' movement. An example, however anecdotal, of changes in public discussion may also be the fact that proFem, a prominent Czech organization dealing with domestic and sexual violence, has deleted texts aimed against shared custody from its websites – for instance an article with the telling name "Shared Custody? A crime against children!" (Střídavá péče? Zločin na dětech!).

It may be argued that the above-mentioned fathers' organizations have participated at least to some extent in this change by insistently addressing certain topics and thus stimulating discussion. They were also one of the impulses leading gradually to a transformation in current discourses. As argued by Fraser (see above), even explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian groups can help expand discursive space and consequently contribute to the increase in equality – an example from history may be the labour movement influenced by Marxism. Its activities contributed to greater social equality, as particularly a certain level of aggression and the insistence of this movement made its opponents accept some of its demands. A similar view can be adopted as regards FRM, as they address topics that may be further developed by less aggressive and dogmatic actors. These may eventually succeed in transforming the particular public discourse in favour of greater equality between men and women as concerns post-separation childcare. The reality is beginning to change, as documented by the increasing number of children in shared custody. (See Zaostřeno 2017)

Conclusion – marginalized hegemons

The only aspect missing in Fraser's argumentation, as applied to the FRM, then seems to be the thesis that an individual can be a member of a hegemonic group in one area and marginalized in another. In many ways the members of the FRM are active co-creators of the hegemonic public sphere, nevertheless,

when it comes to child custody cases, they can be viewed as part of a subaltern counterpublic. As noted by Coston and Kimmel (2013: 378), these men “maintain most of the power and control,” but “they still feel like victims.” It may be argued, on the one hand, that their problem is caused by the fact that they have lost some part of the power they believe they are entitled to: “They may not currently feel powerful, but they feel entitled to feel powerful. It’s this aggrieved entitlement that animates the Men’s Rights movement”. (Coston – Kimmel 2013: 377) It is apparent, on the other hand, that the fathers’ position is unequal to the mothers’, as children are frequently still almost automatically entrusted to mother’s care after the separation of parents, because unlike paternal care, maternal care is seen as the common good.

It is therefore misleading to examine the public sphere through the dichotomy of hegemonic vs. marginalized: it is more of a mosaic in which individuals can easily advocate their case in one field while, in another area, their interests may be ignored. It can therefore be stated that as regards fatherhood, the FRM finds itself in a position of a marginalized subaltern counterpublic that struggles to challenge hegemonic discourses with its own discourse. The latter is, however, not entirely heard since the claims presented by fathers are judged as private and therefore ineligible for public debate. They are dismissed as issues to be treated by specialized social work and social care institutions, a stance echoing Fraser’s already quoted words concerning wife battering and adapting them to the context of child custody. If child custody cases are labelled a personal or a domestic matter and if public discourse concerning this phenomenon is canalized into specialized institutions associated with family law and social work, then this serves to reproduce dominance and subordination based on gender stereotypes.

The fathers’ discourse is also rejected or even ignored since it goes against established discursive protocols, when it is (often rightly) denounced as aggressive and irrational, not contributing to common good and so deemed excessively ambivalent and disruptive.

An important part of the puzzle is the fact that traditionally hegemonic men call for protection from state institutions against women-mothers who are stereotypically perceived as the weaker gender. This is another reason why the voice of men in the situations described above is seldom heard. They are not viewed as being competent of speaking out and their viewpoints, as to what should be part of common concern and the common good, are discarded. Consequently, all they can do is to create their own subaltern counterpublic as an informal discursive space and attempt to enter public discussion by this means.

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