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How does a piece of clothing become a tool for resistance?

In early 2016, the Pussyhat Project, which accompanied the Women's Marches protesting against Donald Trump's presidency, showed worldwide a clothing item can be turned into a symbol and what a movement can gain by having such a tool in its hands. However, the pussy-hat story was not the only example for this phenomenon that year: the supporters of the Hungarian educational movement, too, used such a marker with great – initial – success. The phenomena and dynamics we learned about from the pussyhat story, and the ones I experienced personally among Hungarian students, parents, teachers and other civilians wearing *plaid shirts* shows some striking similarities.

In January 2016, parallel to the Women's Marches a newly formed organization called *I Want To Teach* launched by teachers from the city of Miskolc, published a proclamation voicing the discontent present in the Hungarian educational system (students, parents and teachers alike), demanding a more progressive curriculum, a decrease in students' workload and equal opportunities for students coming from different backgrounds. This proclamation was signed by faculties of a number of renowned Hungarian secondary schools and several minor demonstrations occurred. However, the movement gained real momentum when on February 13th, former State Secretary for Higher Education István Klinghammer called out the protesting teachers in an interview, saying “*we need teachers who are smart, moral, and able to pass these values over to the children. That's why it pisses me off when I turn on the TV and see these unshaved, uncombed teachers marching on the streets in their plaid shirts*”.

The grotesque nature of the image of untidy teachers wearing plaid shirts proved to be a powerful tool in the hands of the newly-formed campaign, which successfully urged its supporters –

both teachers and students – to wear plaid shirts in the upcoming demonstrations, as well as at school or in the street. Part of the reason the use of such derogatory language caused such outrage is because Klinghammer made his comments against a profession traditionally well-respected in the Hungarian society, regardless of social strata or political affiliation. Hashtag campaigns, chequered filters on Facebook profile pictures and such initiatives followed. Having gained this powerful symbol, they reached out to a much wider and more diverse base than before, including remarkably young students who started to organize their own demonstrations and other related events at their schools, and formed an organization – the Independent Student Parliament – to represent the students' demand. This organization still exists and continues to be a strong advocate for progressive education that enjoys popular support and is able to make their voice heard in a

constantly



shrinking public sphere.

Both the pussy hat and the plaid shirts are symbols that were taken over by the

protestors from those in power, and, in this sense, were reactions: the pussy hat referred to Donald Trump's comment about how she can “grab them [women] by the pussy”, while the plaid shirt started as an act of solidarity for those hurt by Klinghammer's comment. This means that those in power “made these symbols what they are” – which explains why they were able to unify such diverse groups of people. These reactions responded to comments that caused widespread outrage, and thus helped people of various beliefs to identify as being *against* something and thus form an efficient community. Even though some general ideas were present, no-one ever specified which particular branch of feminism the pussh hat stands for, or laid out in detail the educational policies

represented by the plaid shirt. What connected the supporters nevertheless was the status of the powerless public, standing up for its (that is, every individual's own) understanding of justice against the powerful few's actions universally considered to be unjust by a coalition of different actors, from the radical left to moderate

*"Plaid shirt day" in ELTE Radnóti Miklós High School, organized by students. Source: [http://hvg.hu/itthon/20160219\\_kockas\\_ing\\_tiltakozas\\_fotok](http://hvg.hu/itthon/20160219_kockas_ing_tiltakozas_fotok)*



conservatives. My personal participation in the plaid shirt movement helped me a lot to understand how this kind of a marker helps movements to gain momentum. I saw how participation and interest in demonstrations increased once we started demonstrating in plaid shirts. I, personally was able to organize an open forum for students and teachers with a handful of fellow students, as well as a street art action: drawing the plaid shirt's chequered pattern on the sidewalk. These events attracted a surprisingly high amount of students, including many whom we had not considered interested in "politics" before. Passers-by also joined in the chalk-drawing activity. These actions, moreover, were not limited to the capital or to major cities, but helped the movement grow nationwide, despite threats and punishments made by pro-government local officers and school headmasters.

One reason behind this attractive power could be that people simply find it *fun* to wear something symbolic. It gives uniqueness and playfulness into political engagement, a subject otherwise often

*"Color a square as you pass by and show your solidarity!" - Photo: Gábor Steller.*



percieved as "serious" or "dry". This uniqueness also means people grow tired of protests slower, because they do not feel the repetitivity of constant protesting if it has an exciting, new element to it. The "pussy hats" took this one step further, as the piece of clothing itself was not merely applied, but *invented* for the purposes of the protests, and the organizers asked the supporters to *create their own hats*, making the movement even more of a community effort. A "pussy hat", especially with this name, is also a more provocative symbol and represents certain political ideas more clearly. This might be the reason why the influence of the pussy hat was more long-lived than that of the plaid shirt of the education movement, even though the initial success of the latter was comparable to that of the pussy hat (on a national level).

That said, the plaid shirt as a symbol still lives in people's memories, is occasionally used, and it would be a mistake to see it as a failure, just because it did not have immediate effects and thus the intensity of the movement decreased. Even though the Hungarian government – despite having some negotiations with representatives of protestors, including the Independent Student Parliament – retained its conservative and anti-egalitarian educational policies, and Donald Trump remained President, this is not the only way – and most typically not the realistic way – for a civic movement to be successful. As Rebecca Solnit points out in her essay *Changing the Imagination of Change*, "a game of checkers ends", but activism, just like "the weather[,] never does". While Solnit makes this statement in order to warn against mistakenly thinging it is possible to "win" a case forever, the same applies for "losing". As Trump and Klinghammer could not know what the consequences of their remarks could be, we can not know either where the women's protests or the Hungarian educational movement will go in the future. What we can know for sure is that these movements now have at their disposal a powerful tool to remind people of their case, give them a shared identity despite differences, and helped a lot of people to get involved in the political process. These achievements do have a long-lasting effect, and those in power can never reverse them – only hope they do not resurface for a while.