

The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years several European countries have witnessed the emergence of powerful social movements mobilizing against the enemy they call “gender ideology”, “gender theory” or “genderism”. Under these labels various issues are united and attacked by conservative, partly fundamentalist groups of society, including satellite organizations of the Roman Catholic Church: certain women’s rights (e.g. reproductive rights in Spain), certain LGBT issues (e.g. same-sex marriage in Croatia, France and Slovenia; human rights strategy of the government in Slovakia), government gender policies (e.g. ratifying the Istanbul Convention in Poland, gender-sensitive education in schools in France), gender mainstreaming as an administrative policy tool (e.g. in Austria, Germany, Poland), progressive sexual education programmes (in Croatia, Germany and Poland), or gender studies departments and their financing (in Germany and Poland). These movements have become a real challenge for the progressive actors interested in gender issues or LGBT rights, partly because they were unprepared for the attacks, and partly because they follow unrelated (and sometimes

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conflicting) agendas. So liberal, green or leftist politicians, women's rights activists, LGBT activists, gender policy officers of public administrations, and gender studies scholars have found themselves put into the same "gender ideologist" or "genderist" box by these movements.¹

The level and quality of involvement of conservative and far-right parties in these movements is different. While in Poland and Germany, for instance, these parties and movements mobilizing against gender show many personal overlaps, and the parties adopt a concrete position in the debates, in France, for instance, the situation is more ambiguous (see Kováts and Pöim 2015). I will first summarize some key elements of previous research findings relevant to this paper and conceptualize the challenge these movements pose to liberal democracy. The second section is a reflection on the different interpretations so far elaborated for understanding the mobilizational potential of the enemy image "gender ideology". In the third section, I will briefly elaborate my preliminary argument for discussion, namely, that anti-gender activism points to societal crisis phenomena going beyond gender equality and LGBT rights, which also connect, at least partially, the understanding of these movements to that of the rise of the far right all over Europe.

"GENDER IDEOLOGY" AS AN ENEMY IMAGE IN EUROPE

How we refer to these movements is theoretically relevant and is not an unproblematic question (see, for instance, Hark and Villa 2015, 7–8; Kuhar 2014). However, exploring this in depth lies outside the scope of this paper. While being aware of its limits, I will use the term "anti-gender movements" in this paper, meaning by it all those movements mobilizing against what they mean by "gender" and "gender ideology", or, in a broader sense, intimate citizenship or sexual citizenship (Kuhar 2014). This does not necessarily mean that these movements are explicitly anti-feminist or anti-LGBT, even though their fight is fought with the enemy constructed by the term and the alleged contents of gender, and even if their struggle may have detrimental consequences for gender equality and sexual rights.

In most affected countries, the concerns of the movements are connected to accusations of imperialism. Omnipresent is the discourse of foreign forces (like EU, UN, WHO) imposing something on our countries in order to weaken them as nations and destroy traditions or even mankind (see e.g. Félix 2015; Grzebalska 2015; and specifically on the anti-colonial

frame Korolczuk 2015). This is often strengthened by the impossibility of translating, or reluctance to translate, the term gender and gender mainstreaming into the national languages. The other recurrent element of the discourse is the figure of the “child in danger”, which is based on fear and has proved successful for the mobilization of masses, especially parents (Chetcuti 2014; Graff 2014). The connection of these two: gender as an intrigue of lobbies which have infiltrated transnational organizations, and as an ideology that threatens our children, makes of “gender” an enemy, an illegitimate claim which needs to be eradicated.

In order to conceptualize the challenge posed by this enemy image, I use Chantal Mouffe’s well-known theory of antagonism and agonism.² To grasp the *political*, she distances herself from Carl Schmitt’s idea of the impossibility of pluralism, as well as from the technocratic-liberal belief in consensuses based on rational debates. She argues that “[p]roperly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives”, and that liberalism has a central deficiency, namely that it negates “the ineradicable character of antagonism (...), the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflicts for which no rational solution could ever exist” (Mouffe 2005, 10). In her understanding of liberal democracy, it is important to find a way to reconcile the political (which inherently contains antagonism) with democratic pluralism (which cannot be based on rational, anti-political deliberation). “The crucial point here is to show how antagonism can be transformed so as to make available a form of we/they opposition compatible with pluralist democracy” (Mouffe 2005, 19). For this purpose she introduces the concept of agonism:

Conflict, in order to be accepted as legitimate, needs to take a form that does not destroy the political association. This means that some kind of common bond must exist between the parties in conflict, so that they will not treat their opponents as enemies to be eradicated, seeing their demands as illegitimate, which is precisely what happens with the antagonistic friend/enemy relation. (...) If we want to acknowledge on one side the permanence of the antagonistic dimension of the conflict, while on the other side allowing for the possibility of its ‘taming’, we need to envisage a third type of relation. This is the type of relation which I have proposed to call ‘agonism’. While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are ‘adversaries’, not enemies. This means

that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place. We could say that the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism. (Mouffe 2005, 20)

In the case of the anti-gender discourse, the concept of “gender ideology” proved to be a tool to create a them/us divide in the sense of antagonism and through it delegitimize different groups in society and politics: in this understanding “gender ideology” and those who are perceived as its lobbyists are not acknowledged as legitimate opponents and are blamed for not sharing any common ground and the same political association. Anti-gender movements in this sense are similar to far-right movements in that they acknowledge the political but negate pluralism. Therefore they pose a challenge to liberal democracy and to the actors committed to it: how to acknowledge rationally insoluble antagonisms while transforming them into agonisms.

When it comes to the analysis of anti-gender movements, the origin of the discourse has been the issue which has so far received the most scientific interest (e.g. Buss 1998; Carnac 2014; Fillod 2014; Paternotte 2015; Robcis 2015), as well as the distortions which the figure of “gender theory” or “gender ideology” has caused in respect of the concepts used in gender studies and in gender policy (e.g. Garbagnoli 2014; Frey et al. 2014).

The research carried out on the origins of the anti-gender discourse and the term “gender ideology” itself (summarized, for instance, in Paternotte 2015) points to the Vatican. Following the 1995 UN Fourth Conference on Women which took place in Beijing (and formulated among others the strategy of gender mainstreaming), the Holy See included in its documents terms like “gender feminists” and “gender agenda” (e.g. Buss 1998). In 2003 the Pontifical Council for Family published the Family Lexicon,³ first in Italian and subsequently in various languages, which systematically expounded the Vatican’s position on what it called “gender theory” and “gender ideology” (Fillod 2014).

The relevant entries in the lexicon refer to John Paul II’s writings, mainly his “Theology of the Body” (1979), “Mulieris Dignitatem” (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, 1988) and “Letter to Women” (1995) (Fillod 2014; Robcis 2015), which can be regarded as founding the anthropology of women. In formulating theses about women’s nature, these writings show a shift from earlier ideas of the subordination

of women to men, towards the complementarity of men and women (as Mary Anne Case argues, “far from being longstanding Catholic orthodoxy, complementarity is a mid-twentieth century innovation imported into Catholicism”, Case 2016, 2) and towards the relationality of human nature (the man exists in relation to the woman, the woman exists in relation to the man) (Garbagnoli 2014, 153–155). These essentialist ideas build the foundation for all argumentations against the critical and constructivist contents of the concept of gender, whether gender equality issues or homosexuality. In this understanding, the term “gender theory” or “gender ideology” serves to represent what is against Catholic teaching on the ontological difference and complementarity of the sexes (Carnac 2014). Several lay people and members of clergy, as national experts, have contributed to spreading these ideas. Among the most influential, as they reach beyond their national borders, are Michel Schooyans, Tony Anatrella, Gabriele Kuby and Marguerite Peeters (Paternotte 2015, 140–141).

Apart from research on the origins of the discourse, and national case studies, studies of these movements have focused on the complicated relations the anti-gender discourse maintains to science and scientificity (Hark and Villa 2015; Fillod 2014; Frey et al. 2014; Kuhar 2014); the role of the Catholic Church not only in the production of the discourse but also in the mobilization (Fassin 2014; Kuhar 2014; Kuhar and Paternotte forthcoming; Marschütz 2014; Paternotte 2015; Perintfalvi 2015), and the role of the conservative and far-right parties in shaping the discourse and the mobilizations (Kováts and Pöim 2015).

Research on anti-gender movements is currently being developed. The transnational connections have just started to be explored (Kováts and Pöim 2015; Paternotte et al. 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte forthcoming). This research can contribute to situating this phenomenon in a broader context, and can answer questions like: How can we explain the emergence of these movements in some countries and their non-emergence in others? Are there specific structural circumstances which enabled successful mobilization in one country and failure in another? What do we know about the people committed to the goals of these movements as far as their socio-economic status, general attitudes, political ideologies and motivations for mobilization are concerned? Addressing these questions will help to overcome treating these movements in and for themselves and to grasp something of the broader societal and political framework that provides fertile ground for them.

INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORKS

In this section I attempt to critically analyse the different conceptualizations in which the Europe-wide anti-gender movements have so far been understood.

The most naive interpretation is that anti-genderism is a misunderstanding by ignorant people, and that if the concept of gender and gender equality is explained in an understandable way, they will know that there is nothing to fear. This interpretation proved wrong when “let’s explain it to them” strategies failed (Grzebalska and Soós 2016; Kováts 2015). Therefore this framework will not be further explored.

National Circumstances

Especially in the initial phase of the movements, when research had not yet revealed the simultaneity of the movements in different countries and the transnational connections (in respect of the discourse and the travelling practices), scholars trying to understand what was going on explained the movements in terms of the particular national circumstances, for instance, from the national historical perspective of the right or far right, or the relation between State and Catholic Church, and so on (e.g. Brustier 2014; Grabowska 2015). David Paternotte also points to this fact: “Despite some exceptions (...) recent mobilisation is explained by social science scholars through national factors—providing us with an iconic case of methodological nationalism” (Paternotte 2015, 130).

Concentrating on the national circumstances proved useful to understanding the national and local contexts as grounds for mobilization, and for instance why a certain issue could become a trigger in a certain country, and which organizational form contributed to the success or failure of the movement. Also, for understanding the construction of the enemy (or even the need for an enemy, see Félix 2015; Kováts and Pető 2017) in the specific context, the national approach could provide useful insights.

However, the simultaneity of the movements, different triggers in countries with various political landscape and gender/LGBT policies, and travelling practices (Kováts and Põim 2015; Paternotte 2015) point clearly to the fact that this national approach is insufficient to fully understand what is at stake.

A variant of the national interpretation is the regional one: Agnieszka Graff develops the idea of a historical East-West divide for the Polish and

Slovak anti-gender movements: “The relative instability of our democracies, the enormous frustrations and resentments about the economic situation, the weakness of women’s and LGBT movements, the strength of nationalist movements—all this has made the anti-gender campaign possible” (Graff 2014, 434). The author operates here within the problematic framework of “East-Central Europe’s lagging behind compared to the West”, which, among other things, does not account for the fact that anti-gender movements have emerged in countries with various political landscapes and gender/LGBT policies, including countries in Western Europe, despite presumably strong women’s rights and LGBT movements and strong democracies. Further exploration is needed to establish whether the specificities of the movements reflect, at least partially, the former East-West divide. Certainly the research project by Kuhar and Paternotte (eds. Kuhar and Paternotte [forthcoming](#)), aiming at depicting the transnational connections, will provide answers to that question.

Strategy of the Roman Catholic Church

As shown in the previous section, the role of the Roman Catholic Church in shaping the discourse and in the mobilizations cannot be overlooked. However, several scholars hold the view that understanding the actors behind the discourse and the mobilizations is equal to understanding the movements. According to this view, the thousands and millions of people joining the movements are manipulated, and used in an evil plan of the Catholic Church.

In this framework, anti-gender mobilization is a mere invention and strategy of the Church, to consolidate its role, regain power and clericalize society by new means (Fillod 2014; Kuhar 2014; Paternotte 2015; Robcis 2015). It must be noted, however, that even these authors emphasize that the Catholic Church must not be seen as a monolithic bloc, and scholars and activists should not interpret anti-gender movements as a Catholic conspiracy. This is evidenced by the various voices (e.g. Marschütz 2014; Perintfalvi 2015) and materials distributed by those Catholics who defend different views on the issue.⁴

Still, scholars who know not only the teachings of the Church, but also the internal debates over teachings and power struggles, acknowledge the Church’s undeniably decisive role and critically reflect on the role played in spreading hatred and exclusion by this discourse (Marschütz 2014; Perintfalvi 2015).

This is a broader framework than the national one, and grasps essential features which go beyond national specificities and (seemingly) national policy debates. It not only helps to explain the discourse, but also to identify the actors, their connections and strategies. But this approach reduces Church politics to a fierce battle of ideologies, and anti-gender mobilization to a conscious manipulation strategy. This does not account for the scope of the phenomenon, for its popularity among the masses and for the reasons behind this popularity.

Conservative Backlash

The movements are frequently understood as a conservative backlash against achieved levels of equality between women and men and/or LGBT rights.

In their Preface entitled “Gender/Backlash. In the Wake of yet Another Conservative Revolution”, the editors of the volume “Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise?” state: “The concept of ‘backlash’ refers to perceived setbacks and deteriorations in the relations between (and among) men and women. Its proponents assume that gender equality and LGBT rights are on the decline all over the developed world, or that there is at least a significant increase in rabid attacks against them” (Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise 2015, 7).

This perspective of “the patriarchy/heteronormativity fighting back” seems as tempting as it is simplifying. The activists on the field, especially those subjected to aggressive attacks, can often see only the attack on their work and achievements. It can easily be perceived as, and reduced to, a backlash. They are often stigmatized and pushed into a defensive position which in turn seems to justify their views and increases their urgent demands for reinforcement of EU and UN norms. This is also a morally comfortable position. It would be a capitulation to revise their own positions, language, or agenda on the grounds of unjust, often *ad hominem* attacks. The gender concept of the opponents is so obviously distorted compared to those in gender studies or gender policy, and this leads to the fact that activists often adhere uncritically to the framework of pro-contra proposed by these movements (pro-gender against anti-gender, see Grzebalska and Soós 2016; Kováts 2015).

In itself, the fact that these movements appear simultaneously, partly co-ordinated, and show transnational ties, points to the fact that they are something more than patriarchy or heteronormativity fighting back.

Though these movements are not necessarily anti-feminist and homophobic *per se*, they undoubtedly fight the terms in which equality is defined by progressive actors (anti-discrimination language, human rights paradigm, statistical equality, individualizing identity politics). This position is even more challenging as the above-mentioned essentialist Catholic teaching on complementarity and relationality, being the ideological background of these movements, contests the possibility of articulating certain questions of gender inequality and the equality of loves.

On the basis of the above-mentioned regional argument, the framing of anti-gender movements as solely a backlash is problematic. As Elżbieta Korolczuk argues, “in countries such as Poland, Ukraine, and Russia the process of women’s empowerment and the emancipation of the LGBT community has been uneven, fragile, and far from revolutionary. (...) Thus, ‘backlash’ understood as an adverse reaction to something that has gained popularity, prominence, or influence does not seem to be a very productive model” (Korolczuk 2015, 52). Though I don’t share her view on the East-West divide having an explanatory value, the argument against the backlash framing seems to be reasonable.

GENDER AS SYMBOLIC GLUE

In the previous section, I have presented the most current interpretative frameworks which, in my view, have contributed to understanding one aspect of this complex phenomenon in depth. However, in and for themselves none of them can alone account for the complexity of the anti-gender phenomenon. In this limited space, and at this stage of the research on transnational connections, I cannot pretend to fill this gap, but I will attempt to describe the direction in which the existing results lead, for further elaboration and discussion.

Based on the English, French, German and Hungarian literature, it seems that more and more scholars are seeing a link between these movements and the crisis of the socio-economic order.

Chetcuti argues that this nationalist neoconservatism is a sort of answer to the neoliberal consensus (Chetcuti 2014, 253). Wimbauer and her colleagues argue, based on an impressive literature of feminist economics and feminist critics of the neoliberal order, that discourses against gender equality and gender studies are an explicit or implicit attempt to get experiences of precarity and precarization under control (Wimbauer et al. 2015, 43) and that the feminist and LGBT struggles have found a comfortable

place in the neoliberal order and are therefore made co-responsible for the damage it causes by the anti-gender actors (ibid., 50–52). Solty echoes this latter thesis (Solty 2015, 37) and goes even further. In his comparison of the movement against an LGBT-friendly curriculum in Baden-Württemberg and protests against a school reform in the US, he speaks about “culturalization of the social question” by the right wing. He argues that the rage over socio-economic deep structures is shifted to the cultural surface structure (ibid., 36), and concludes his analysis by arguing that the left must find another vision rather than adhering to neoliberal ideas, and re-invent its emancipatory programme.

Andrea Pető (Pető 2015a, 2015b) argues that it is indispensable for scholars seeking to understand anti-gender movements, and for activists and politicians on the progressive side seeking to counteract them, to reflect on the content of progressive politics (questioning neoliberalism), on the language of equality (statistical equality, human rights, EU as a neoliberal project while being sold as norm owner of gender equality and human rights) and on the language of politics (technocratic, policy-based). She pleads for a re-enchantment of politics and of the language of (gender) politics (Pető 2015b). This is all the more necessary because what remains of the post-World War II consensus is becoming more and more challenged by the growing fundamentalism represented by the far right and now by anti-gender movements (Kováts et al. 2015).

There is no simple identification between anti-gender movements and the far right: far-right parties are not on the side of anti-gender struggles in all countries and contexts; anti-gender mobilizations reach out far more, and labelling these movements as fundamentalist does not help to better understand them, on the contrary. Still one can argue that the understanding of anti-gender movements and understanding the rise of the far right can, at least partially, follow similar patterns. Weronika Grzebalska makes this argument when she connects these movements with the failure of progressive politics:

[W]aging a war against the rise of political extremism and religious fundamentalism can only bring us so far as mitigating the symptoms of a disease instead of curing its root causes. So what are these root causes and why do masses of people become radicalized against liberal democracy in its current form? (...) [T]hanks to a growing literature dealing with the social consequences of the current economic system we know for sure that a large part of the answer

to this question is that the neoliberal, market-driven democracy that we currently see in Europe, structurally excludes a huge number of people (...) It is in this context that conservative protest movements create a space for these people to vent their fears and insecurities, voice their anger and dissatisfaction with politics and claim a sense of agency and empowerment that European liberals and social democrats once promised—but failed to deliver.

She then describes some examples, one of them being how the massive immigration of Polish women resulted in a moral panic on the right that proposed a return to traditional family values as a solution.

By all means, members of the European feminist and LGBT+ movements as well as progressive politicians have been right in opposing anti-gender mobilizations, and criticizing the solutions offered by them as threatening human rights and destructive to democratic society. But as they were calling for the need to protect women's and minority rights and other liberal values from right-wing attacks, what they so often ignored is the fact that the liberal democratic system in its current form has become an empty slogan to the vast masses of people to whom it has very little to offer, among them rural mothers forced to migrate to support their families (...) Therefore, the task that stands before European political leaders and decision makers is to acknowledge the connection between anti-genderism and other forms of right-wing radicalisation on the one hand, and the broader crisis of democracy stemming from the failure of the current globalised, capitalist order on the other.” (Grzebalska 2016)

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that the emergence of powerful anti-gender movements points to social crisis phenomena going beyond gender equality and LGBT rights. These movements and their success in identifying gender as an enemy are rather symptoms and consequences of deeper socio-economic, political and cultural crises of liberal democracy which need further scientific investigation. These crises need to be acknowledged and tackled, while new common grounds for transforming antagonisms into agonistic struggles (Mouffe 2005) need to be established; otherwise, the ongoing “process of dedemocratization of capitalism through the de-economization of democracy” (Streeck 2013, 28) will lead to further crises in Europe.

NOTES

1. Grzebalska and Soós (2016) provide a comprehensive analysis of the strategies used so far by progressive actors Europe-wide to counter these movements.
2. She elaborates these concepts in *The Democratic Paradox* (2000). I quote her from *On the political* (Mouffe 2005).
3. “Lexicon for Ambiguous and Controversial Terms on the Family, Life and Ethical Questions.”
4. See for instance a leaflet spread in the German-speaking countries: http://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2015/2015-187a-Flyer-Gender.pdf, accessed 30.03.2016.

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