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Review of Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilising against Equality

By Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Eds.) Rowman & Littlefield, 2017

Review by Ulrike M. Vieten*

Address
*Correspondence: [u.vieten@qub.ac.uk]

Linkages between the Christian Far Right, anti-gender conservatism as well as anti-queer discourses have been made beforehand, for example by Angelia Wilson (2000, 2013; see also Wilson & Burack, 2012) when looking at the emergence of the US Tea party, and far-right discourses in media and at private Christian universities. In that regard a close ideological link between far right discourse and the establishment of a far right elite was noticed, years ahead of Trump's election. By now, in 2018, we have to admit the mainstreaming of far right extremist views, anti-gender resentments and the renaissance of far right parties in governance has gone global though with regional differences.

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As far as Europe is concerned we also might remember the 2011 mass murder in Norway: the fascist Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people, in Oslo and on the island Utøya. He had circulated texts with anti- Islamic, but also anti-feminist and misogynist views on the day of his attacks. Certainly, anti-feminism and far–right extremist worldviews have been intertwined, and are around for some time. But there are not that many studies looking more closely at the connections between populist extremism, anti-gender discourses and the role of Christianity in Europe.

Kuhar's & Paternotte's co-edited collection responds to a need to look more in-depth into the role of the Christian Right in Europe, and here more specifically at the role of the Catholic Church in pushing back emancipatory *Zeitgeist* and generating anti-gender debates in varies EU countries. Case studies discussed in their book include material from Austria, France, Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Spain and Poland, all very much shaped and dominated by Catholicism; but also from Germany, where Protestant Christianity is influential, too, and Russia, the latter, somehow at the border next to Europe. The collection intends to fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge of how the Catholic Church institutionally, culturally and politically (!) encompasses societal trends cheering far right populist ideology and having joined transnational forces in political anti-liberal discourses.

With far-right parties in power (e.g. Hungary and Poland) or in coalition (e.g. Austria), and otherwise far right parties and far right populist movements expanding (e.g. France; Italy or Germany) it seems this topic needs more attention, indeed. Keeping in mind that it is not possible to do justice to all the complex issues raised by the range of authors and the variety of discussed countries, I will concentrate on the argument and analytical scope of the editors' introduction and conclusion, and bring in arguments of the chapters on Hungary, Poland and Austria, where electoral success of far-right populist parties points alarmingly into the direction of linkages between institutional Catholic conservatism, far-right populist views and anti-gender discourses.

At the core of Paternotte's & Kuhar's argument is the observation that similar forms of street protest in different countries and a shared repertoire of texts, the latter referring to historical non-violent resistance, is used systematically to express the will of the *ordinary* man and woman

against gender mainstreaming, feminism and attempts to deconstruct social roles of women and men. What is more, this opposition to a critical gender discourse is evolving transnationally, and indicates a new stage of anti-gender mobilisation.

For the journal readers, and more widely for us as feminists the use of the term 'anti-gender ideology' in the context of the far right might be astonishing here: however, it tries to capture a recent trend by the populist far right and the Christian right targeting emancipatory policy (e.g. pushed by grassroots feminist movements; EU anti-discrimination directives and EUGH jurisdiction; United Nation's gender mainstreaming goals) and taking over for their purpose the term 'anti-gender ideology'. According to Kuhar & Paternotte (p.7) ' "Gender Ideology" is often presented (in a far right discourse, UMV) as new leftist (sic!) ideology, emerging from the ashes of communism'. According to the far right mind 'gender ideology' is responsible for taking away the 'cultural' autonomy of people in different societies, undermining the right of men and women to live their ordinary lives as they know it.

This is troubling, indeed, as it co-opts 'gender ideology' and uses this as an empty signifier. The feminist deconstruction of gender power (e.g. what we call 'gender ideology') is converted to an anti-anti-ideology. This emerging anti-gender discourse dismisses all knowledge archives and distinctive intellectual critical interventions that de-construct biological essentialism and power structures. The readers might also want to turn to this blog https://thedisorderofthings.com/2018/01/09/dear-hurt-male-egos/ to engage with some of the problematics of this misogynist irrationalism linking it with the erosion of male privileges in different countries.

It does not come as a surprise though that the Roman Catholic Church, for example, and their Popes, developed a strategy to counter the liberalisation of sexual freedom and independence of women since the Beijing conference in 1995: 'The coining of the negative term "gender ideology" came both as an answer to the interrogation of the Vatican and as a means of action which should be understood in the frame of a global Catholic strategy. Relying on the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony (Brustler, 2014; Peeters, 2011: p.221), it aims at propagating alternative ideas by using and subverting the notions it repudiates and to contest the supposed cultural and political hegemony of "postmodern gender" in the context of a global battle of ideas' (p.10).

But how come that European Christian secular societies fell for extremely hardcore institutional Church views though they seemed more moderate and emancipated since the 1970s? In what ways do national and 'local' state of minds indicating the success of far-right politics also combine anti-gender phobia with stern Catholic conservatism, in recent years? Kováts & Pető highlight in their chapter on the 'Anti-gender discourse in Hungary' that there is an effective anti-genderism without an active street movement. Despite a visiting researcher appointment of Gabriele Kuby, who also is cited by the co-editors as one of the most renowned anti-Gender ideologists across Europe, and with the far right leader Victor Orban in charge, there is not that much scope to oppose a yet established anti-liberal and anti-EU discourse that is articulated in positions of the Hungarian far right government. However, Kováts & Pető warn that the post-World II consensus that subscribed to a 'progressive politics' and conveyed, for example, in the claims of 'the rooting of identity politics in neo-liberalism'... the language of equality as for example in human rights and statistical equality', and the 'EU as norm owner of gender equality' and 'the language of politics (technocratic, policy-based)' are challenged (p.127). They are challenged by 'fundamentalism represented in the Far-Right and now by anti-gender movements' (*ibid*).

This is a more generic observation reflecting processes that have fed into the electoral success of far right parties, for some time. The authors stress that the Hungarian situation is very different to the one in Poland. And when reading Graff's and Korolczuk's chapter '"Worse than communism and Nazism put together": War on gender in Poland' we understand the different stages of anti-gender discourses and anti-gender mobilization, immediately. Graff and Korcolczuk identify an inaugural moment of the anti-gender movement in Poland: 'the Pastoral Letter of the Bishops' Conference read in Poland's parishes, on 29 December 2013' (p.175). Though mobilization might have started the year before, either way conservative family oriented politicians, journalists, grassroots activists and priests pushed the anti-gender agenda in a country that is dominated religiously and culturally by the Catholic Church. The authors stress the transnational element, and argue convincingly for a wider entanglement of an anti-gender, anti-liberal, but also anti-Western (e.g. EU anti-discrimination regulations) discourse in post-communist settings. Remarkably, also the connection between a Polish self-perception of being colonialized by the West (and to the East by Russia) and the renaissance of far-right nationalist sentiments are problematised in the conclusion of the chapter. My favourite sentence is, 'The anti-genderism provided a "symbolic glue" (Pető, 2015) facilitating an alliance between "the altar" and "the stadium" that is between the Catholic Clergy, anti-choice organisations and right-wing extremists, including football fans' (p. 189).

Some of these findings also came up in a *European Research Council* funded project on 'Living with difference' (see also Vieten, http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/law-and-justice-polands-return-to-catholic-morality-and-a-homogenous-society) underscoring the structural dynamics of cultural Catholicism when rooted in misogynist, and anti-foreigner world views of a predominantly homogenous society.

The last country case study I am going to mention is the one on Austria, where recently[1] a central right wing and far right government was greeted. Mayer & Sauer in their contribution '"Gender Ideology" in Austria' pinpoint how anti-gender ideology ties into contemporary anti-Muslim racism; e.g. a culturalist and gendered imagination of the 'oriental' Other (See pp. 34-35). Tellingly, the anti-gender discourse triggers paradox positions as Islam is blamed for being inherently sexist whereas European ('post 1970's) liberalisation is attacked equally for being responsible for the '*Untergang des Abendlandes*' ('decline of the occident'). 'Discourses on anti-Muslim racism and on "gender ideology" - contradictory as they may appear – are interlinked to form a broader picture of decay and ultimate danger' (p. 35).

What is relevant to keep in mind here, and as similarly expressed by the authors of the Hungarian case study, a broader 'anti-hegemonic approach against the equality and emancipation of women and LGBTIQ people as well as against the liberalisation and pluralisation of Austrian society since the 1970s' (p. 37) has developed rapidly in the last five to ten years. It is parochial, unashamed nationalistic and post--post-cosmopolitan: it presents itself close to authoritarianism, hailing nativism and performs a hybrid form of mono-cultural totalitarianism. This message comes across in several chapters and should be alarming even to cynics (like me).

Paternotte & Kuhar argue in their conclusion that 'It ('gender', UMV) squeezes different discourse into one big threat that different actors can connect to, and appears as unifying ground because it is constructed as an attack on at least one of the three Ns defended by these actors: nature, the nation and normality' (pp. 259-260).

The Roman Catholic Church, however, is a transnational actor though sitting comfortably in the Vatican, and as is illustrated in all the chapters flexible and adaptive to national(ist) histories and discourse. Commonality exists where the themes of heteronormativity, the 'natural' role of women and men, patriarchal family values, anti-abortion and broader issues of anti-hedonism and anti- individual sexual choice come into sight.

The co-edited collection makes a valuable contribution to understand the ways the Christian right in Europe operates, and how the Catholic Church ideologically pushed an anti-gender discourse in different countries. It has to be said that some of the consideration in the conclusion of the co-editors might have been better placed in their introduction to make an easier read, and help to comprehend the patterns evolving across the different and differing country case studies.

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Notes

[1] Writing in December 2017.

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