

"Anti-gender" Mobilisational Discourse of Conservative and Far Right Parties as a Challenge to Progressive Politics

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Gender as symbolic glue

THE POSITION AND ROLE OF CONSERVATIVE
AND FAR RIGHT PARTIES IN THE
ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATIONS IN EUROPE

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
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EPILOGUE: “ANTI-GENDER” MOBILISATIONAL DISCOURSE OF CONSERVATIVE AND FAR RIGHT PARTIES AS A CHALLENGE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

Andrea Pető

“Gender ideology ignores the existing scientific knowledge.” This surprising statement by Jan Figel, former EU Commissioner for Education and Culture (quoted in Kuhar 2014), shows that the “gender ideology” debate opens up a new chapter in the political, cultural and social landscape of Europe questioning previous political chasms. The five chapters in this volume analyse a new political phenomenon: tens of thousands of people are demonstrating on the streets, collecting enough signatures for referendum controlling rights of a group of citizens in their own country, petitioning to change the curriculum in higher education (See more in Pető-Vasali 2014). While on the one hand the popular appeal of democratic politics is decreasing – less and less voters are participating in elections and traditional parties have problems recruiting young members – this new movement seemingly solves these problems of participation. Is this phenomenon really new or has progressive politics just been unprepared for these developments accepting the consoling thesis by Fukuyama about the “end of history” therefore labelling it as “new” and covering up its unpreparedness?

1. A new/old movement: gender as “symbolic glue”

The political developments described by the authors from France, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in this volume also warn us about our own limits of understanding regarding this anti-gender movement. This is really a new rhetoric of identity formation which

is outside the previously universal human rights framework where gender found its comfortable space. At first sight, these movements are anti-gender, but as the careful analysis in this volume proves, this type of argumentation based on its positionality regarding gender offers a wider alternative to different spectrums of life and gender is only the symbolic glue. It is a strategic question for progressive politics how this new political, electoral, social and cultural trend will influence traditional conservative politics which itself has been a product of human rights consensus in Europe. Conservative politics varies along national contexts, accordingly the positioning of anti-genderism in the different countries covered in this volume as far as their position to anti-genderism is concerned.

The representatives of these anti-gender movements only use these gender policy arguments as a cover up for fostering a deeper and profound change in the European political and value system. That is only possible as the promise of gender equality either has not led to the expected changes (in the case of “new Europe”) or it led to too many superficial changes (in the case of “old Europe”). The case studies are from Europe but this anti-gender movement is a global phenomenon. Its global appeal is due to the fact that different countries are questioning the universal human rights framework of politics based on their “cultural” exceptionalism. There are several cases of governments framing aid promoting reproductive rights as imposing “gender ideology” on their national context in an anti-colonialist “freedom fighting” framework. The popularity and massive appeal of these anti-gender movements warn us that if progressive politicians want to understand this new major political trend they need to have a new framework of understanding. These anti-gender movements do not pursue the utopian character of gender equality achieved in the near future, but rather they focus on the political temporality of the Now. Different temporalities highlight that these movements have been

built on the fundamental weaknesses of progressive politics and their promise of the fast-changing world of globalisation.

2. Reactions

Reviewing the references of the papers proves that the phenomenon and also scholarly and political reflection as well as counter strategies are very recent, which makes this volume very timely. Papers in this volume convincingly argue that anti-gender mobilisations are hegemonic fights in the Gramscian sense for control as they redefine human rights and the progressive European tradition of equality. The closing section of each paper in this volume discusses possible strategies progressive actors are using against the anti-genderism. In this section of my paper I analyse some reactions as far as their impact is concerned.

The first reactions are traditional enlightened offensive reactions which question the ability of others to understand what gender is, and gender activists started educational campaigns.

The second reaction is a defensive reaction to use gender equality policy language to trench the fortress of already existing policy provisions. Korolczuk pointed out that those scholars who are use the term “backlash” when characterising the anti-gender movement are assuming a non-existent wide consensus about what gender means and what it should achieve. (Korolczuk 2014)

The third reaction, parallel with entrenchment, is an offensive reaction of blogging and using new social media for monitoring the developments inside the movement. This went parallel with spotting problems in the Catholic Church which is believed to be the major initiator and institutional organiser of this campaign. (Paternotte 2014)

3. Counter-strategies

The main battleground for “gender ideology” turned out to be science as the opening quote of this paper proved and, as Roman Kuhar convincingly argued, comparing the Slovenian and Croatian developments: The anti-gender movement’s use of “scientific” evidence against “gender ideology” means a paradigm change in science as we know it. Kuhar called this strategy the “secularisation of the discourse in order to clericalize society” (Kuhar 2014). The post-modern turn of modernity, which introduced a politically informed, critical and interdisciplinary way of studying science claimed the construction of new knowledge, whereby unacknowledged actors needed to be acknowledged from a critical perspective – with gender being one of these critical perspectives. In this context, science became a moral and normative category acknowledging the positionality of the knower. This approach also questions the subject-object division and brings in new symbols, new myths and redefinitions. This positionality – what Eric Hobsbawn referred to as “my truth is as valid as your truth” – signals an anti-universalistic approach leading to new scientific paradigm which is now appropriated by anti-gender forces. However the visibilisation of anti-gender forces, “naming and shaming” strategies, as far as debating what is scientific according to whom, are only partly successful. It only deepens the chasms without really understanding the depths of the threat and especially without offering new methods, rhetoric for not only protecting what progressive politics believe it has achieved but how to move forward.

The first step for formulating counter strategies is to create an independent strategy, not only one that reacts to the attack. It should be accepted that progressive politics is a result of the enlightenment and therefore it has a clear cut vision of normativity

which always creates minorities categorising them into a position of “other” and into “private” realm. The European tradition of enlightenment is working with normative positions. Therefore this anti-gender campaign is just appropriating the old tools as a unifying attempt with targeting LGBTQ groups to strengthen European Christian cohesion. Magdalena Środa, the Polish feminist philosopher said this fight against “gender ideology” is an “alliance between church and the stadium”. This statement implies that this anti-gender movement is just a renewed form of neoliberalist governability based on consumption and massive control. But not only that. This is a fight to redefine neoliberal representative democracy and this process is creating new political chasms and progressive politics should be active in this process.

By now it is clear that the anti-gender movement is a new phenomenon in European politics which requires new methods and frameworks of thinking for meaningful reactions by the progressive forces. If progressive politics forgets its value and innovative grass-root origins, then only using the already invented gender equality policy measures will not prevent this new anti-genderism phenomenon to prevail in the long run. The bravery and the originality of those historical political actors who dared to question previously unquestionable dogmas of society and political life should be applied. The “disenchanted” progressive politics should be “re-enchanted” (Pető 2015: 139-145). The papers in the volume prove that the most successful mobilisational force of these movements is the new language they are using for political mobilisation. Using the concept of gender as a technical category in the long run can be more self-destructive than useful while encountering this new political challenge. The real and new challenge is that after 1945 anti-modernist alternatives have never received so many votes in democratic elections as viable alternatives. The rise of the far right is a fact and in their electoral success anti-

genderism works as a symbolic glue. After reading this volume I hope it is clear that no more time should be wasted in thinking of alternatives by progressive forces.

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B

Frigide Barjot (Virginie Tellenne)

France

Former member of a satiric group and singer, and former member of the Gaullist party in France, she became the first leader of the Protest for Everyone (“La Manif pour Tous”).

C

Anton Chromík

Slovakia

One of the spokesmen of the Alliance for Family: it was the Alliance for Family that decided to carry out the referendum on the protection of family in Slovakia. In April 5, 2014 the alliance started to collect the necessary signatures. The president, Andrej Kiska obtained a civil petition with more than four hundred and eight thousand signatures concerning the implementation of a referendum on family protection in August 28, 2014. Chromík is a lawyer and deals with the provision of legal services in the areas of worker’s rights representation and the representation in civil and commercial law. He was also against the strategy of human rights, gender equality strategy, and supported a referendum on the family.

Jean-François Copé

France

Chairman of the UMP (2012-2014) in France, former member of RPR (post-Gaullist Rally for Republic), removed from office in 2014 because of a scandal. In February 2015, he led a campaign against some youth books, especially “All naked” (“Tous à poil”).

D

Madeleine Bazin de Jessey

France

Leader of the Protest for Everyone (“La Manif pour Tous”) in France, founder of “Common Sens” (“Sens Commun”), a conservative caucus dedicated to political struggle in the UMP.

Ludovine de la Rochère

France

Current leader of the Manif-movement in France: She appeared in the demonstrations of other European anti-gender movements, for instance in Spain, Slovakia and Germany.

Dóra Dúró and Előd Novák

Hungary

Hungarian lawmaker couple of Jobbik. Dúró is the head of the Committee on Education and Culture, Novák is the vice president of Jobbik and the chair of Committee on Social Welfare in the Assembly. They are the main responsible actors in Jobbik for the issues regarding women, family and demography politics.

E

Ilona Ékes

Hungary

Former Hungarian lawmaker of Fidesz, and former member of the Committee on Human Rights, Minority, Civic and Religious Affairs, made her voice heard many times connected with gender issues as abortion, prostitution, domestic violence, homosexuality, and talked against the so-called “gender ideology”.

F

Ján Figel

Slovakia

The Deputy Chairman of the National Council of Slovakia, the chairman of the KDH party. He was strongly against the strategy of human rights, the gender equality strategy, and supported a referendum on the family. He declares that the strategy of human rights has been inspired by “gender ideology”.

G

Jarosław Gowin

Poland

Polish Christian conservative politician, and Minister of Justice between 2011 and 2013. In April 2012 he opposed the ratification of the Istanbul Convention calling it “the product of feminist ideology”.

H

Rózsa Hoffman

Hungary

Former Hungarian Secretary of State for Public Education referred to the so-called “gender ideology” relating to the decree on education for kindergartens about gender equality.

J

Jobbik Youth Division

Hungary

One of the key actors in Hungarian anti-gender mobilisation that has a connection with the Polish movement against “gender ideology”.

Erika Jurinova

Slovakia

The Vice chairperson of the National Council of Slovakia, a member of OLANO. She was also against the strategy of human rights, the gender equality strategy, and supported a referendum on the family.

K

Birgit Kelle

Germany

CDU member and chairwoman of the “woman 2000plus” association (Frau 2000plus). Among other things she has published in the new right weekly newspaper “Junge Freiheit”

(in Germany) and in the “Kopp-Verlag” publishing house publicly associated with conspiracy theories, but also in the German periodicals “Focus” and “die Welt”. She is seen on talk shows and has reached larger audiences with her criticism against feminism and gender. She recently released her new book “Gender Gaga” from the publishing house Adeo.

Beata Kempa

Poland

United Poland MP, Chair of “Stop ‘gender ideology’” Parliamentary Committee, famously wrote a letter to Meryl Streep about the “threats of gender”.

Kuruc.info

Hungary

Main far right news site in Hungary, where many articles were published about the so-called “gender ideology”.

L

Miroslav Lajčák

Slovakia

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia, the Chairman of the Council of Human Rights, national minorities and gender equality of Slovakia. He coordinated and elaborated the human right strategy.

M

Igor Matovič

Slovakia

The chairperson and a co-founder of OLANO, Member of Parliament in Slovakia. He was also against the strategy of human rights, the gender equality strategy, and supported a referendum on the family. He appealed to the referendum saying: “Children should have fathers and mothers” (Matovič 2015).

O

Fr. Dariusz Oko, Ph.D

Poland

Polish pastor, assistant professor of philosophy at the Pontifical Theological Academy of Cracow, media personality, and a stark opponent of the so-called “gender ideology”; he is famous for supporting his views with alarming graphs and statistics.

P

Krystyna Pawłowicz

Poland

Law and Justice MP in Poland, famous for her offensive statements about gender and gay marriage, has been reprimanded on numerous occasions for her behaviour by the Sejm Ethics Committee.

S

Zsolt Semjén

Hungary

Hungarian Deputy Prime Minister from 2010, leader of the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). He had made strong anti-gender statements many times.

T

Ferenc Tomka

Hungary

Hungarian theologian, author of the manifesto entitled "From the sexual revolution to the gender revolution".

V

Hedwig Freifrau von Beverfoerde

Germany

The spokesperson of the "Family Protection" initiative ("Familien Schutz") which she founded in common with the campaign network "Civil Coalition" ("Zivile Koalition"). She is also the German spokeswoman for Citizens' Initiative "One of Us" which presents itself as the European Citizens' Initiative for the protection of life in Europe, committed to preventing abortions. She fights against mandatory child care and for an increase of child care hours in kindergartens.

Beatrix von Storch

Germany

Was involved in founding of the party AFD in Germany (“Alternative für Deutschland”). She has had a seat in the European Parliament since July 2014 where she fights against “gender-mainstreaming”, for example against the so-called “Tarabella-report” which promotes access to abortion as a fundamental right and as part of sexual and reproductive health and rights. In Germany she lectures on the topic “civil rights, gender-mainstreaming, political correctness”.

W

Laurent Wauquiez

France

Former Sarkozy Universities Minister in France, also one of the politicians most involved in the dialogue of the conservative movement. He endorses the conservative agenda, commits himself to the conservative activists inside the UMP, and supports Sarkozy’s campaign for 2017.

Z

Eric Zemmour

France

French conservative columnist. Author of “The French Suicide”, a bestseller in France. One of the first to criticise on TV the so-called “gender theory” on his TV-broadcast.



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“Gender as symbolic glue”

The position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilization in Europe

This publication aims to critically analyse the emergence of anti-gender mobilisations in European far right and conservative party programmes and the role of the respective parties in shaping the discourse and mobilisations. Five case studies – France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia – are looked upon. Common chronological overview and transnational commonalities are introduced.

The authors argue that “gender” serves as “symbolic glue” for agenda setting for conservatives and the far right political forces. However, anti-gender forces have a deeper roots in crisis of neoliberalism. The publication offers policy recommendations to progressive actors to stand against fundamentalist political activism.

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