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Questioning Consensuses: Right-Wing Populism, Anti-Populism, and the Threat of 'Gender Ideology'

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Abstract

Since 2012, several European countries (among others Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia or Slovakia) have seen the rise of conservative and, in part, fundamentalist social movements against the perceived threat of what they call (depending on the context) 'gender ideology', 'gender theory', or 'genderism'. The movements mobilizing against 'gender ideology' are frequently understood as a conservative backlash against achieved levels of equality between women and men and/or LGBTQ rights. This perspective of 'the patriarchy/heteronormativity fighting back' seems as tempting as it is simplifying. I discuss the transnational movements against 'gender ideology' in the context of the rise of right-wing populism and on the basis of considerations seeking to explain their demand side. On one hand, I argue that the study of this phenomenon provides important clues for understanding the reasons behind the rise of populist forces in Europe and beyond. On the other hand, I propose that 'gender' is not the final target for these movements and that they should not be understood primarily as mobilizations against equality. Rather, I see the emergence of these movements as a symptom of a larger systemic crisis. 'Gender ideology' in this sense embodies numerous deficits of the so-called progressive actors, and the movements or parties that mobilize against the perceived threat of 'gender ideology' react to these deficits by re-politicizing certain issues in a polarized language. Based on Chantal Mouffe's critique of the established hegemonic idea of consensus in liberal democracy, I discuss two consensuses that are characteristic of the so-called progressive actors (including the feminist and LGBTQ actors), namely, the neoliberal consensus and the human rights consensus, and their contribution to the rise of the movements against 'gender ideology'.

Keywords

anti-populism, Chantal Mouffe, consensus, gender equality, 'gender ideology', LGBTQ, neoliberalism, right-wing populism

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Introduction

Since 2012, several European countries (among others Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, or Slovakia) have seen the rise of conservative and, in part, fundamentalist social movements against the perceived threat of what they call, depending on the context, 'gender ideology', 'gender theory', or 'genderism'. Being opposed to women's rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues; certain administrative policy instruments (such as gender mainstreaming); as well as the public financing of gender studies departments, the advocates of these platforms tend to regard all political and non-governmental actors, administrative staff, and scientific researchers who focus on these issues as a single homogeneous group and an organized lobby. This is partly manifested in grassroots or religiously affiliated movements and partly in the agenda of right-wing and populist parties.

The triggering factors for the surge of these movements vary across countries. In Slovenia, for instance, it was the debate about same-sex marriage; in Croatia, it was the discourse around new reproductive technologies; in Austria and Germany, the policy tool of gender mainstreaming was attacked; in Hungary, it was the launch of a gender studies specialization at a university, and so on (Hark and Villa, 2015; Kováts and Põim, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). The simultaneity of the movements, the different triggers in countries that differ with respect to political landscape, as well as gender and LGBT policies indicates that rather than dealing with isolated cases, we are witnessing a transnational phenomenon. As the transnational character is a defining feature of these movements, it is not possible to single out one or two countries to explain what is at stake. Although I am well aware of the fact that proposing a transnational frame for an article of this limited scope bears the danger of glossing over the contextual differences, this danger seems worth taking in light of the specificities of the phenomenon.

The fact that the expressions 'gender ideology', 'gender theory', and 'genderism' are used interchangeably in the discourse, with one of the terms being more prevalent in one country and another one elsewhere (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017: 2), poses a conceptual challenge. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) remind us that

> It is crucial to bear in mind that 'gender ideology' does not designate gender studies, but is a term initially created to oppose women's and LGBT rights activism as well as the scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality. Erasing fierce controversies within gender and sexuality studies and the complex interplay between activism and the academy, it regards gender as the ideological matrix of a set of abhorred ethical and social reforms, namely sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage and adoption, new reproductive technologies, sex education, gender mainstreaming, protection against gender violence and others. (p. 5)

The movements mobilizing against 'gender ideology' are frequently understood as a conservative backlash against achieved levels of equality between women and men and/or LGBTQ rights (Kováts, 2017b). This perspective of 'the patriarchy/heteronormativity fighting back' seems as tempting as it is simplifying. In my article, I will try to challenge this narrative.

First, I will briefly describe what is at stake and what the conceptual challenges to addressing the phenomenon are, then, based on Chantal Mouffe's critique of the established hegemonic idea of consensus in liberal democracy, I will discuss two consensuses that are characteristic of the so-called progressive actors (including the feminist and LGBTQ actors), namely, the neoliberal consensus and the human rights consensus, and their contribution to the rise of the movements against 'gender ideology'. I will argue that, on one hand, the study of this phenomenon provides important clues for understanding the reasons behind the rise of populist forces in Europe and beyond. On the other hand, I propose that 'gender' is not the final target for these movements and they should not be understood primarily as mobilizations against equality, but rather as symptoms of a broader crisis.

Conceptualizing the phenomenon

Despite the fact that it seems to have been established in the relevant scholarship, it is problematic to describe the movements attacking 'gender ideology' as anti-gender movements (cf. Scheele, 2016). Those using the terms 'genderism' or 'gender ideology' not only (and not always) reject the arguments of feminist and gender scholars who use gender as a structural analytical category, but put contents and ideas under these labels, to form a threatening and coherent discourse, which none of the labelled actors recognizes for themselves. Therefore, if these movements are called anti-gender, that would suggest a symmetry of the terms and of two camps (one is *for* and the other one *against* something) (Scheele, 2016: 3–4). However, it is important to note that, especially in the feminist and LGBTQ activism of the Anglo-Saxon countries, the term *gender* is often used interchangeably with the term *gender identity* (if one identifies with his or her sex).[1] Moreover, left-leaning/feminist critics refer to this activism sometimes as gender ideology (without quotation marks), what complicates the issue.[2] Therefore, I refer to the movements in the context of the rise of populist right and as symptoms of a broader crisis as mobilizing against the enemy image of 'gender ideology'.

It is important to note that anti-'gender ideology' discourse and mobilization is partly overlapping with right-wing populist movements/parties to varying extent within Europe (and beyond). However, they are not identical, meaning that not all anti-'gender ideology' movements are connected to the right-wing populist parties and not all populist parties use 'gender ideology' as the enemy in their ideology and politics. In many countries, populist parties are the main actors or join forces with the (civil society/religious) actors mobilizing against the perceived threat of 'gender ideology'. For instance, the programme of the German right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, which gained 12.6% at the last elections to the Bundestag in September 2017) contains provisions to cut funding for gender studies. The Hungarian right-wing government refuses to ratify the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence with the pretext that this is not the real goal of the convention; the real goal would be the 'implementation of the gender philosophy',[3] and the convention is the 'Trojan horse of gender ideology'.[4] In other countries, parties prefer to keep their distance from these anti-'gender ideology' movements; for instance, the right-wing populist Front National distances itself from the French movement *La Manif pour Tous*.

Also, these actors often employ gender-equality arguments and fail to see a contradiction between their anti-'gender ideology' stance and their arguments against Muslim men, that is, that they would threaten the European value of respecting the bodily autonomy of women and gay rights (cf. Farris, 2017; Malomvölgyi, 2017).

My article tries to address the above-mentioned challenges, that is, the relation of these movements to the concept of gender, the transnational character of the movements, and the complicated interplay between right-wing social movements and populist parties concerning the enemy image 'gender ideology'.

The complexity of this phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary approach and to draw upon concepts and methodologies of sociology, social movement studies, gender studies, religious studies, political science, and so on, while it is nearly impossible to unite them all in one brief paper. My article concentrates on the connection of these movements with the right-wing populist surge which has so far been neglected. Furthermore, I discuss the role that so-called progressive actors play in the perpetuation of taboos and false dichotomies (e.g. conservatives vs progressives). At this point of describing the problem, it relies less on conceptual debates within gender studies and more on narratives of activists and political debates while acknowledging that in the future, this gap must be filled. I therefore primarily rely on political science debates, first of all theoretical considerations to understand the current rise of right-wing populism.

I argue that the vehement debates on the continent about 'gender ideology' seem to be connected to the current contestations in the Anglo-Saxon world about identity politics, a simplified notion of intersectionality and gender understood as identity. Here, I aim to formulate a first link between these Anglo-Saxon countries and the continental European countries in which a lot of research has already been carried out on movements against 'gender ideology' (see Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) for extensive references).

In formulating this connection, it seems helpful to discuss these movements in the context of the rise of right-wing populism and on the basis of considerations seeking to explain their demand side, that is, the reasons for their popularity among voters.

Conceptualizing movements against 'gender ideology' in an era of anti-populism

In the last years, the term populism has gained enormously in popularity beyond the academic literature, and this has intensified even more since the Brexit vote and Donald Trump's election. Cas Mudde (2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 1–2) notes that 'populism' became a buzzword, and that there is virtually not a politician (be it on the right or on the left) who has not been labelled populist at one time, because most people use the term as a *Kampfbegriff* (combat term) to defame a political opponent. Chantal Mouffe (2016b) calls this phenomenon of overuse '*anti-populist hysteria*'.

Building on this critique, I understand right-wing movements, in addition to presenting a potential danger for democracies, as a critical intervention challenging several, partly anti-democratic consensuses of the mainstream. This article concentrates on one aspect of the populist surge: the way the rise of the populist right is connected to the tendency to dismiss views deviating from the supposed/desired liberal consensus as populist.

In this article, I will situate the movements against 'gender ideology' in the context of the *demand* for right-wing populism. Numerous social and political scientists have attempted to identify the demand-side reasons of populism and call for taking these seriously in order not to mitigate the symptoms (e.g. attitudes), but rather to address the root causes of their popularity. The identified factors include the perception of large part of electorates that their concerns are kept off the political agenda by political elites (e.g. growing precarization); that their political elites are powerless in the face of transnational companies and supranational bodies (Mudde, 2004, 2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017)–the 'there is no alternative' (TINA) pact of centre-right and centre-left parties (Grzebalska, 2016; Mouffe, 2005, 2016a, 2016b).

Chantal Mouffe's critique of the idea of consensus in the political realm is helpful for understanding the opposition to 'gender'. One of Mouffe's (2005) key arguments is the critique of the idea of consensus. As she famously states, the existence of agonistic spaces–where the adversary is conceived as part of the same political space but the inherently conflictual nature of politics is recognized–is a precondition of a functioning democracy. While there might be a consensus of elites or there might be a perceived consensus, neither one of those can eradicate the political and with it the conflict. She holds the politics of consensus accountable for the fact that societal conflicts surfaced in an antagonistic manner:

> A well functioning democracy calls for a clash of legitimate democratic political positions. This is what the confrontation between left and right needs to be about. Such a confrontation should provide collective forms of identification strong enough to mobilize political passions. If this adversarial configuration is missing, passions cannot be given a democratic outlet and the agonistic dynamics of pluralism are hindered. The danger arises that the democratic confrontation will therefore be replaced by a confrontation between essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values. When political frontiers become blurred, disaffection with political parties sets in and one witnesses the growth of other types of collective identities, around nationalist, religious or ethnic forms of identification. (Mouffe, 2005: 30)

In what follows, I will briefly analyse two consensuses prevailing among so-called progressive actors including feminist and LGBTQ activists. I will argue that to some extent, these also contribute to mobilizations against 'gender ideology'.

The neoliberal consensus

For Chantal Mouffe, who concentrates on Western Europe, the neoliberal consensus–that is, the pact of the centre-right and centre-left parties in TINA, 'There Is No Alternative', to the neoliberal form of globalization–is the main reason for the strengthening of right-wing populism. This consensus bans every alternative and concurring vision to the current economic order as illegitimate, and in the European Union (EU) context: euro-sceptical (Mouffe, 2005).

The abundant feminist critique of gender mainstreaming and the NGO-ization of activism highlight the fact that institutionalization of certain feminist claims in the policy

realm shifts gender equality away from the horizon of everyday experience and language of the people and presents it largely as a policy issue rather than a political one. However, it must be noted that in countries where gender mainstreaming was one of the main battlefields of the struggle against 'gender ideology' (first of all Austria and Germany), right-wing actors did not treat it predominantly as a technocratic policy tool, for which it is repeatedly criticized by feminist theoreticians. Instead, they understood 'gender' as 'gender identity' of the trans/queer identity politics, and saw gender mainstreaming as a conscious and conspiracy strategy for spreading this approach.[5]

Similarly, Natacha Chetcuti (2014) argues that this nationalist neo-conservatism (as she puts it) is a sort of answer to the neoliberal consensus (p. 253). In fact, in several countries, these movements make explicit allusions to market fundamentalism when arguing for the need to oppose 'gender ideology'. This can be illustrated with some French examples:

The *Printemps français*, the radical wing of the French Manif movement, mentions in its manifesto the 'dictate of market ideology', and that they reject a society where banks serve as cathedrals. According to the manifesto, 'gender theory' is 'ultra-individualistic, hedonistic and radically relativist', and therefore has the same roots as market fundamentalism.[6] Tony Anatrella, one of the main ideologues against 'gender theory' in France (and beyond), urges African bishops to

> resist vigorously the imposition by Western NGOs, the U.N., and the E.U. of 'gender theory', which he described as an 'intellectual virus', which 'like Marxism is contrary to human interests', but which also, in promoting moral and anthropological deregulation, presented risks analogous to unfettered market capitalism. (Case, 2011: 805)

Likewise, Romain Carnac (2014) quotes Jutta Burggraf, another main ideologue, that the claims of 'gender theory' found '*a fertile ground in the individualist anthropology of neoliberalism*' (p. 137).

That the actors mobilizing against 'gender ideology' often identify a connection between the term 'gender' and individualism/ neoliberalism is based on the idea that gender is freely chosen, not constrained by norms, nature, and biological sex. What makes this right-wing critique more complicated is the fact that the same criticism is raised from a feminist or leftist perspective, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries and Germany where trans/queer identity politics is an important strand of feminist and LGBTQ activism. These critics argue that the identity politics approach turns emancipatory movements into terrains of individual claims for recognition and moral questions and that by adopting the logic of neoliberalism instead of collectively addressing systemic problems, this strand fosters individual adaptations. To provide an example, it is argued that queer politics encourages individuals to reject the categories themselves (man or woman) instead of fighting the narrowly defined gender roles of men and women and the system which sustains them, and that if one does not comply with the expected gender roles, then one does not belong to that gender (Reilly-Cooper, 2016).[7] This seems in line with Nancy Fraser's critique, addressed as early as in 2000, and then in her debate with Axel Honneth that the tendency to formulate recognition questions in identity-politics terms undermines systemic critique, lacks a critical reflection on the

socio-economic embeddedness, displaces redistribution questions, and reiterates identities (Fraser, 2000; Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

The human rights consensus

The human rights consensus which formed the basis of the post-World War II order in the West is another notion questioned by the forces mobilizing against 'gender ideology' (Pető, 2016). To these applies what Mouffe (2005) says in the above quote: they became '*non-negotiable moral values*' (p. 30).

There is a growing body of scholarly literature discussing whether human rights share the responsibility for neoliberalism or have simply been a 'powerless companion' to market fundamentalism (e.g. Moyn, 2014). However, it is articulated more and more often that the human rights framework does not allow for the addressing of systemic questions, including global power inequalities.

First, the universalistic and 'non-negotiable' framework of human rights covers up the embeddedness of the agenda in the global context. In East-Central Europe, for instance, the arrival of the human rights approach coincided (in time and partly in actors), in a time of democratic transformations, with the catching up with what adhesion to neoliberal capitalism required (Kováts, 2016, 2017a), and the focus of human rights NGOs is currently strongly influenced by the agenda of Western donors.

Second, for example, in the form of the popular call among activists for the 'rainbow coalition', this framework hides the fact that there might be a conflict of interests between different human rights claims and groups (e.g. between gay rights activists and feminists on the question of surrogacy, between disabled advocates and feminists when it comes to the 'sex as human right' debate, or between feminists and trans activists around certain claims of trans-identity politics).

Third, more and more claims find a place under the umbrella of human rights–and if they get there, they become morally non-negotiable. For instance, the sex-worker approach, anything but uncontested among feminists, attempts to delegitimize the abolitionist position on the basis of human rights. Likewise, queer activists treating gender as a fluid identity claim that it is their human right that their chosen non-binary gender be recognized, and those who are not ready to do that are accused of perpetrating symbolic violence.

This trend is exemplified by the stigmatizing designations used by human rights activists, for example, the terms 'whorephobe' or 'SWERF' (sex-worker exclusionary radical feminist–one who does not agree with the sexwork standpoint), 'queerphobic', 'transphobic', or 'TERF' (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) for ones who do not agree with certain political aims of trans or queer activism. Conceptual and strategical debates are, of course, nothing new in activism striving for more social justice. However, in case of the (desired) 'human rights consensus', certain political positions are labelled as illegitimate (exclusionary or phobic) on the basis of a moral judgement. The same is true for the inflation of the terms 'racist', 'sexist', 'misogynist', and 'homophobic'. This labelling makes the understanding more difficult, and obfuscates the debates within progressive movements, for example, on the issue of same-sex marriage among gays and lesbians.

Strengthening of the demand for populism (and anti-politically-correct language for that matter) occurs in connection with people opposing political claims that are labelled and stigmatized because an agonistic conflict is prohibited on a moral basis. Those who rally against political correctness in the United States, Germany, or Hungary do not all stand for the right to dehumanize other people or upholding hierarchies (e.g. among men–women, heterosexuals–homosexuals, White–Black), but they voice their rage that under the pretended/desired 'human rights consensus', their political concerns are presented as illegitimate.

Obviously, the human rights paradigm is not apolitical in the sense that it is a substantive political claim, that there are undeniable rights that cannot be put to the plenum of majority rule. However, it requires a more accurate analysis to decide which rights and how they can become a part of this paradigm, and what should be put up for an agonistic debate instead.

Conclusion

The movements mobilizing against 'gender ideology' are frequently understood as a conservative backlash against achieved levels of equality between women and men and/or LGBTQ rights. This perspective of 'the patriarchy/heteronormativity fighting back' seems as tempting as it is simplifying. The activists perceive that 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 seems to be so obviously distorted compared to those in gender studies or gender policy (often without being aware of concurrent, even contradicting definitions within these), and this leads to the fact that activists often adhere uncritically to the framework proposed by these movements, reinforcing the false culturalist dichotomies of progressives versus conservatives. What I have tried to show is that these movements are not necessarily anti-feminist and homophobic per se, even though they undoubtedly fight the terms in which equality is defined by progressive actors (anti-discrimination language, human rights paradigm, statistical equality, and individualizing identity politics).

On one hand, I argued that the study of this phenomenon provides important clues for understanding the reasons behind the rise of populist forces in Europe and beyond. On the other hand, I proposed that 'gender' is not the final target for these movements and they should not be understood primarily as mobilizations against equality. Rather, the emergence of these movements is a symptom of a broader crisis, and their ideologies are the tip of the iceberg (Grzebalska et al., 2017). *Gender* provides the theatre for the struggle for hegemony in the Gramscian sense, and these mobilizations are rather the throes of a contest for redefining liberal democracy where 'gender ideology' embodies numerous deficits of the so-called progressive actors, and the adversaries of the concept react to these by re-politicizing certain issues in a polarized language. Therefore, interpretations limiting this phenomenon to a 'fight between values' function as rather an obstacle to understand the phenomenon, by repudiating or obscuring this important structural realignment. Chantal Mouffe's (2005) critique of the established hegemony of consensus in liberal democracy helped to clarify that in case agonistic forms of confrontation are not allowed, then

> [t]he danger arises that the democratic confrontation will therefore be replaced by a confrontation between essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values. When political frontiers become blurred, disaffection with political parties sets in and one witnesses the growth of other types of collective identities, around nationalist, religious or ethnic forms of identification. (p. 30)

It seems that this is exactly what we are witnessing with the rise of the populist right and with movements contesting what they call 'gender ideology'. Essentialist forms of identification took over and antagonistic fights are being carried out: the other one is not perceived as an adversary of the same symbolical political space, but as an enemy outside of it.

Given this structural context, therefore, it is not useful to see movements against 'gender ideology' in terms of culturally defined binaries (past vs future, regress vs progress, intolerance vs tolerance, closed-mindedness vs open-mindedness, etc.). Doing so would only contribute to the rising demand for populist alternatives by obfuscating the material and power aspects the illusion of liberal progress is embedded in (Kováts, 2017a), and dismissing political claims on the grounds of presupposed consensuses.

I argue that the movements against 'gender ideology' should be seen as a plea. They challenge liberal democracy as we know it, and in that framework, they question the consensuses of the so-called progressive actors. But instead of being trapped in a besieged fortress syndrome and bemoaning the lost consensuses, academics and politicians alike should work towards creating agonistic spaces for re-politicizing conflicts in a manner compatible with pluralist democracies.

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Notes

1. Compare with Green (2006). The definition of gender here is 'gender refers to a person's felt sense of identity and expression' (Green, 2006: 247).
2. For example, here: https://gendercriticalgreens.wordpress.com/2016/08/15/a-feminist-view-of-gender-identity-politics/
3. Szilárd Németh, one of the deputy chairs of the major coalition party Fidesz, 21 November 2017: http://www.atv.hu/belfold/20171114-nemeth-szilard-soha-nem-fogjuk-tamogatni-az-isztambuli-egyezmenyt
4. http://www.citizengo.org/hu/fm/41487-az-isztambuli-egyezmeny-alairasa-gender-ideologia-trojai-falovat-jelentheti-magyarorszag
5. For example, http://www.deutschland-kurier.org/zwei-geschlechter-sind-genug/; or, during the World Congress of Families on 26 May 2017 in Budapest, the former US delegate to the

United Nations (UN), Janine Crouse, said that the gender mainstreaming means in reality the 'LGBT agenda'.

6. The manifest used to be available here: http://www.printempsfrancais.fr/467/manifeste
7. There are plenty of analyses like that, partly by scholars, partly by activists; see, for example, http://bennorton.com/adolph-reed-identity-politics-is-neoliberalism/, http://www.feminist-current.com/2016/09/27/need-braver-feminists-challenge-silencing/, and https://fairplayforwomen.com/gender-new-youth-tribe

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