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# Paradoxes in the Far Right's gender and sexuality politics: Nationalism, Islamophobia and multiple positionings on gender

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Over the last decades, issues related to gender and sexuality came to the center of public and political debates in Europe. Right-wing parties and actors across Europe are gaining popularity while increasingly drawing on gender and sexuality in their anti-immigration and anti-Muslim rhetoric (e.g. Mayer, Ajanovic and Sauer 2014, Meret and Siim 2013). This Special Issue results from an international workshop organised by the Network for the Anthropology of Gender and Sexuality (NAGS), part of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), and held at VU University Amsterdam in December 2019. The workshop interrogated entanglements of anti-migration and gender discourses, including anti-gender movements across Europe. Its overall aim was to discuss different ‘uses and abuses of gender’ in relation to migration and Islamophobia as deployed by right-wing discourse (Scott 2013).

Victor Orbán’s Hungary was one of the first significant examples at the time of how anti-gender thought could translate into policy. In 2018, Orban withdrew the accreditation of gender studies programs and cut them from government funding. In the following years, more countries witnessed a surge of right-wing electoral gain. The far right Sweden Democrats and Italy’s Fratelli d’Italia entered government coalitions in the last few months. Both parties’ gender politics will offer new interesting avenues for research as they exemplify the conflictual and often paradoxical approaches to gender, women’s rights and sexuality within the far right. The case of Sweden Democrats has been particularly noteworthy given Sweden’s embrace of gender equality values as essential to its national self-understanding and identity. The Sweden Democrats maneuver between using gender equality values against multiculturalism, migration and Muslims on the one hand, and adhering to nationalist family ideology and traditional gender roles on the other. (e.g. Towns et al., 2014; Sager & Mulinari 2018). This Special Issue explores this central tension between (rhetorical) support and ideological aversion of gender and sexual equality among right-wing actors.

The right-wing relates to issues of gender, feminism and sexual rights in increasingly complex and variegated ways. One set of literature has focussed on the instrumentalisation of gender equality and LGBTQ rights. Numerous right-wing groups, especially in Europe’s West and North, have rhetorically supported discourses of gender and sexual equality in an effort to distinguish between ‘us’ (progressive Europeans) and ‘them’ (Muslims, minorities, and refugees). Such appropriations have been conceptualized through the notions of homonationalism (Puar 2007), femonationalism (Farris 2017), and sexual nationalisms (Mepschen and Duyvendak 2012). As Cornelia Möser noted, the term femonationalism has been mainly used in following scholarly work to refer to right-wing claims of support for women’s rights while seeking ways to stigmatize or exclude migrants and Muslims who allegedly do not value women’s rights (Möser 2022). The more complex analysis that Farris advances - in which (liberal) feminist, far right islamophobic and neoliberalist discourses converge - has been much less engaged with, or criticized, as Möser does. Others have conceptualized right-wing instrumentalisation of gender equality discourse as part of a shift from nationalism to ‘civilizationism’ in which Islamophobic sentiment is central (Brubaker 2017), or as an example of ‘liberal’ forms of Islamophobia as opposed to ‘illiberal’ forms which are much more easily recognized and condemned as representing anti-Muslim racism (Mondon and Winter 2017). Literature has indeed mainly examined local forms of right-wing gender politics and argued how these developments have served to widen racialized boundaries between communities and advance restrictive migration and refugee policies.

Some right-wing dominated arguments on gender, sexuality and family relations have played an important role in shifting political debates concerning multiculturalism in Europe. The right has been influential in condemning particular gendered practices such as underage marriage, honour crimes and female genital cutting. Culturalized gendered practices have successfully been brought to the focus of debate and served to question migration and multiculturalism. In countries such as Norway and the Netherlands, these kinds of controversies had a share in leftist parties’ distancing from the multicultural ideal as a

guiding principle for policy making, while allowing right-wing parties to increase their public appeal (e.g. Akkerman and Hagelund 2007, Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010). Consequently, right-wing actors successfully redefined common understandings of gender violence to refer to culturalized practices performed by non-white non-Western immigrants (e.g. Bader and Mottier 2021; see also Bonfanti; Anastasiadou and Samara in this Issue). Gender inequalities and forms of gender violence among white populations are then ignored or minimalized.

In contrast to such uses and abuses of gender, the concept of gender, together with LGBTQ rights, are increasingly under attack by different actors, including political parties, conservative and religious advocacy groups and individuals across Europe. Based on the common opposition to a perceived threat that these actors term as ‘gender ideology’ or ‘gender theory’, scholars have coined the term ‘anti-gender mobilization’ (Kováts and Poim 2015, Köttig, Bitzan, and Petó 2017, Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). The political actions of anti-gender actors have often been directed against same-sex marriages and rights of transgender people, and have included organising mass protests, such as those organised by La Manif pour tous (LMPT) in France (Fassin 2016), marriage referendums, and campaigns against the Istanbul convention (Krizsan and Roggeband 2021). At the same time, homophobic, anti-transgender rhetoric has frequently been underpinned by overt anti-immigration and islamophobic arguments. The practice of intertwining political homophobia with anti-immigration politics is best visible in the rhetoric of right-wing and far right politicians such as the aforementioned Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán and former Deputy Prime Minister of Italy Matteo Salvini (Kahlina 2022). One of the most prominent discursive threads present in anti-gender politics is the call for replacing the notion of gender with the idea of complementarity of the sexes, stemming from the allegedly ‘natural’ differences between women and men. The complementarity between men and women and the reproductive potential of their coupling is further perceived as the basis on which the institutions of marriage and family should be defined (Bracke and Paternotte 2016, Case 2016, Fassin 2016).

This linkage of anti-gender discourse and accompanying reproductive politics on the one hand and anti-immigration stance on the other has become most powerfully expressed in far right population ‘replacement’ theories. According to this view, non-white immigrants in Europe, and especially Muslims, are seen as a threat to the existing demographic balance. The original white European population is said to be replaced by non-white immigrants. Replacement theory is ideologically propagated as an intentional conspiracy between Western progressive elites and (Muslim) immigrants (e.g. Bracke and Aguilar, 2021). While Western men are called upon to avert ‘population exchange’ and defend national traditions, women should contribute by having more children and raising the nativist birth rate (Goetz, 2021). Feminism, multiculturalism and egalitarianism are here seen as internal threats that are in alliance with the external threat of immigration.

Indeed, in the European context, the notions of gender and sexuality have played an important role in the intertwining of nationalism with other exclusionary discourses, either as a ground for homonationalist exclusions, or providing the ground for exclusions of ‘internal outsiders’, such as feminists and LGBTQ people (Kahlina 2020; Sauer, Kuhar, Ajanović and Saarinen 2016). Moreover, what we can also observe today is the extensive use of the populist appeal to ‘the people’ in the context of nationalist, racist and xenophobic right-wing politics. As Rogers Brubaker points out, one of the key features of contemporary populisms across the globe is the tight interweaving of the vertical (‘people’ vs. ‘elites’) and horizontal (‘people’ vs. ‘outsiders’) antagonisms (Brubaker 2017b, 2019). The horizontal exclusions against the ‘threatening others’ which can be both ‘below’ and ‘outside’, and which are especially present in the right-wing populist rhetoric, bring populist discourses close to nationalism. In fact, according to Brubaker (2019), the conceptual difference between the two is not so clear-cut. Thus, the frequent interplay between populism and

nationalism today is better understood as an intersection of already overlapping discourses, instead of two strictly separated ones (Brubaker 2019).

As this brief overview shows, the concept of gender became a subject of intense political struggles over its meaning and legitimization in contemporary Europe. It is also clear that these struggles take place in the moment of further proliferation of anti-immigration discourses in the light of refugee crisis and increased immigration to Europe. In this special issue, we aim at providing a deeper understanding of the ways in which the current struggles over the notion of gender are closely interwoven with nationalist, anti-immigration agendas. Our particular focus on the tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions produced in this context, joins the burgeoning scholarship on paradoxes within right-wing gender and sexual politics (Möser, Ramme, and Takács 2022; Dietze and Roth 2020).

The first contribution, by **Marianthi Anastasiadou** and **Jasmine Samara**, examined Greece's by now disbanded neo-Nazi political party Golden Dawn. The authors focus on the writings and speeches of the party's women's branch, called Women's Front, between 2007 and 2019, when the party was voted out of parliament. Violence against women has been turned into a racialised issue. Placing a heavy focus on women's safety and vulnerability, they successfully dominated the debate by portraying immigrant/Muslim men as perpetrators and Greek/white women as victims. At the same time, the concepts of gender equality and human or women's rights are devalued and considered not useful as they allegedly fail to protect Greek/white women. Instead, Golden Dawn propagated the concept of 'equal honour' that relies on gender complementarity rather than gender equality and is in line with 'Greece's cultural heritage and traditions'. While relying on gender equality values to exclude Muslims from the political imaginary, the party rejects them at the same time in defense of traditional family ideology.

The discourses of women's safety and vulnerability voiced by women involved in right-wing anti-immigration politics has also been in the focus of **Aleksandra Sygnowska's** contribution. In her article, Sygnowska addresses the paradoxical endorsement of women's wellbeing and security by Polish right-wing female political actors with the record of supporting the policies considered as detrimental for women's health and welfare, such as further restrictions of abortion law. Sygnowska meticulously scrutinizes the politics of fear as the key element of contemporary anti-immigration discourse in Poland. While framing the phenomenon of immigration as a source of threat to Polish women, the politics of fear constructs the victim-oppressor relationship between Polish women and Muslim immigrants/refugees. Such interplay of women's rights and anti-immigration discourses in the political rhetoric of Polish female politicians from the right-wing political spectrum represents an important example of how women's wellbeing is selectively employed for the advancement of exclusionary politics.

Several authors point at right-wing attempts to redefine common understandings of historical events in order to advance an anti-migration political agenda. Golden Dawn's constructions of Islamophobia involve portraying Muslim men as potential perpetrators of violence against women but also as a national threat. The nation needs to be protected from immigrants as they alert to the dangers of 'population exchange', while redefining refugees as 'displacers' rather than as 'displaced'. Anastasiadou and Samara show how common Greek understandings of the notion of 'population exchange' are challenged and converted by far right discourse. Originally referring to the 'mass expulsion of Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities between Greece and Turkey in 1923', Golden Dawn's propaganda warns that multiculturalism aims for large 'politically correct population exchange'.

A similar attempt to reverse common understandings of historical events is illustrated in **Paris Cameron-Gardos'** article on the Danish film 'Brotherhood'. The author mentions a similar far right aim to 'reinterpret history' by converting the historical symbolism of the notion 'Danish resistance'. Instead of referring to resistance against Nazi Germany during the Second World War, the Danish far right succeeded in transforming its meaning to

resisting immigration. The Danish context in which far right and Islamophobic thought are mainstreamed, forms the background for Cameron-Gardos' study of a fictionalized neo-Nazi group in the film 'Brotherhood'. His analysis focuses on homoerotic desires emerging in the context of a neo-Nazi group as depicted in the film. While using the film narrative of a homoerotic love affair between two male members of a hyper-masculine neo-Nazi gang bonding around white nationalism, anti-immigration and homophobia, Cameron-Gardos brings a compelling reflection on tensions and contradictions between different forms of self-identification and belonging. Through careful interweaving of film narrative and existing theories of neo-Nazi/far-right homosociality, Cameron-Gardos' article presents an important contribution to understanding the troubled coexistence of racism, homosociality and homoeroticism in the far-right male bonding.

A fourth and final contribution, by **Sara Bonfanti**, discusses the complexities of examining honor-related violence among immigrant communities in a context of mounting racialized Islamophobia and xenophobia. Focusing on the Panjabi minority in Brescia, Italy, Bonfanti reconstructs media and public discourse of honor related violence cases and demonstrates their intertwinement with right-wing xenophobic discourse and anti-immigration policy measures. The author points at the paradox at work in public and right-wing discourses that culturalize gender violence among the Panjabi community and obscure similar phenomena when occurring in majority society. The notion of 'honor' received particular legal recognition as a mitigating factor in Italy's penal code until 1981. Yet, this reality is cast aside in an effort to strengthen Islamophobic sentiment and support anti-immigration policy. Bonfanti contributes to the critical study of gender violence against an increasingly complex political background of civilizationism, nationalism and Islamophobia.

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