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## **Gender as “Ebola from Brussels”: The Anti-colonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism**

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### **Introduction**

In January 2015 on his way from Manila, Philippines, Pope Francis warned the faithful against “gender ideology”—a dangerous imposition from wealthy Western countries on developing nations. According to the Pope, foreign aid and education are routinely tied to acceptance of gender equality policies; “this is the ideological colonization,” he claimed, adding that “good and strong families” can overcome this trend (O’Connell 2015). These ideas have been repeated many times since, e.g. in Naples 2015 and in Kraków 2016, where the Pope stated:

In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these—I will call it clearly by its name—is [the ideology of] “gender.” Today children—children!—are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. (Quinlan 2016: 1)

Such claims are not entirely new —anti-colonial rhetoric has long been used as a strategy for both resisting and promoting gender equality, e.g. in debates about feminism in non-Western countries or abortion and homosexuality in Africa (e.g. Hoodfar 1997, Kaoma 2012, Narayan 1997). What is remarkable about the present scenario, however, is the extent to which the anti-colonial frame as used by the right is no longer about colonialism. It has evolved into a powerful metaphor for the arrogance of Western liberal elites; a discursive device divorced from actual colonial history, which is why it has worked in countries such as Poland. The conservative version of anti-colonialism simply equates gender egalitarianism with colonization, and often compares it with twentieth century totalitarianisms and global terrorism, or even the deadly Ebola virus. We argue that this version of anti-colonial frame works in the service of illiberal populism, by demonizing global elites and coming to defense of ordinary people worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Whereas before anti-feminist movements tended to ignore

economics or to support free-market capitalism (especially in the US), in the context of post-2008 crisis it is illiberal populist rhetoric that is gaining track on the right in Europe and the US.

This article analyses anti-genderism as a coherent ideological construction consciously and effectively used by right-wing and religious fundamentalists worldwide. In what follows we examine the basic tenets of anti-genderism, shedding light on how this ideological construct contributes to the contemporary transnational resurgence of illiberal populism. We argue that today's global right, while selectively borrowing from liberal-left and feminist discourses, is in fact constructing a new universalism, an illiberal one, which replaces individual rights with rights of the family as a basic societal unit (see *World Family Declaration* n.d.) and positions religious conservatives as embattled minority.

With its nationalist rhetoric, which sometimes includes explicit racism and anti-Semitism, and its aggressive use of the language of “family values,” this mobilization may appear as yet another resurgence of gendered nationalism (Einhorn 2006, Ekiert 2012, Graff 2009, Wodak 2013, Yuval-Davis 1997) or simply a continuation of decades-long right-wing resistance to gender egalitarianism as promoted by the United Nations and later the European Union (Bob 2012, Buss 1989, Case 2012, Favier 2015). We, however, agree with scholars who have observed that the present wave of resistance involves new forms of organization and discourse, which allow “conservative actors to reach beyond their traditional circles and connect with a wider audience” (Paternotte 2014, see also Kováts and Põim 2015, Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). What makes it new is the shift from conservative anti-feminism which focused on reproductive and sexual rights, to a much broader ideological construct that effectively combines a critique of liberal value systems (individualism, human rights and gender equality) with opposition towards contemporary global capitalism (Peto 2015). Today's right-wing opposition to gender equality and feminism takes the form of a transnational political mobilization—an alternative illiberal civil society—based on an alliance between the religious fundamentalists and illiberal populists. This alliance is facilitated by the persistent use of the terms “gender” and “gender ideology” (aka “genderism”) which have become empty signifiers, flexible synonyms for demoralization, abortion, non-normative sexuality and sex confusion (Mayer and Sauer 2017), but also for the ideology of global (neo)liberal elites (hence the significance of the anti-colonial frame). “Genderism” —a phrase which sounds ominous and alien in most cultural contexts—has

replaced “feminism” in global right wing rhetoric, strengthening the critique of gender equality movements as powerful and foreign “colonizers.”

We argue that despite its focus on issues of morality, anti-genderism is in fact a political movement, which results from and responds to the economic crisis of 2008. The crisis revealed the weakness not only of the neoliberal economic model but also of liberal democracy as a space for processes of inclusion, equality and freedom. Anti-gender mobilization is part of this process; anti-genderists claim to represent the “true” civil society, which aims to replace bureaucratized and alienated elites with their foreign funded nongovernmental organizations and supranational institutions. The key ideologues (e.g. Kuby 2015; Peeters 2007, 2013) are self-proclaimed defenders of freedom and democracy, which in their view have been hijacked by liberals and leftists. Anti-genderists effectively mobilize people gathered in existing national and local groups, churches, and political parties, and they are increasingly networking on the global level through international anti-choice coalitions, organizations such as the World Congress of Families, and the online petition platforms, such as CitizenGo with over four million registered users worldwide. Grassroots anti-gender mobilization often takes the form of groups of “concerned parents” protesting against what they perceive as state-imposed “sexualization” of children through sex education and gender equality training programs (Höjdestrand 2017, Fábíán and Korolczuk 2017, Strelnyk 2017). The arguments promulgated by anti-gender ideologues must be understood as part of a global social conservative “ideoscape” (Appadurai 1996), in which local actors draw heavily on each other’s agendas while accommodating their claims and strategies to specific sociopolitical situations. While Kováts and Põim (2015) demonstrate that resistance to gender has become a “symbolic glue” linking the programs and discourses of far right and conservative parties in Europe, we show that it is the anti-colonial frame that provides ideological coherence to an otherwise loose coalition of religious and national players worldwide.<sup>2</sup> It is an important ingredient of today’s illiberal populist turn.

The first part of this article presents our positionality and methods. The second part broadly discusses interpretative frameworks that can be applied to the war on gender. The third and fourth sections develop a new way of theorizing this phenomenon, one that links different cases of mobilization with anti-genderism as an ideological construct. We examine the right-wing use of an anti-colonial frame, which we identify as anti-genderism’s key discursive structure. The fifth section discusses the far-reaching implications of this phenomenon for feminist theory and practice. We conclude with the claim that the opposition

to gender is key for the ideological coherence of the present illiberal turn and that anti-genderism has become a new language of resistance to neoliberalism. The appropriation of the anti-colonial frame by global right-wing forces seriously limits discursive strategies available to the left in response to neoliberalism.

### **Positionality and methods**

The insights presented in this article are an outcome of our engagements as feminist scholars and activists working at the intersection of academia and civil society in Poland and Sweden. Our analysis results from participation in several collaborative projects, which emerged in response to anti-gender campaigns in the European context.<sup>3</sup> As activists, we are affiliated with various initiatives, bodies and organizations, some of which have been targeted by the anti-gender campaign.<sup>4</sup> Since the outbreak of the “war on gender” in the Polish context in 2012 (see Graff and Korolczuk 2017), we have participated in a number of public debates and confrontations concerning “gender ideology” in Polish media and public institutions, realizing over time that we are witnessing a coordinated effort on the part of right-wing groups and networks, aimed at delegitimizing gender research and ultimately gender equality policies and projects. Occasionally, the subject of our analysis became part of our embodied experience: when we participated as observers in demonstration against sex education in schools in September 2015 in Warsaw, or when facing a smoke bomb deployed by right-wing activists during a public debate on gender organized at the Dominican Church in Warsaw in the fall of 2013. In short, we are what anti-genderists call gender ideologues. Our aim, however, is not to debunk and ridicule but to understand. Committed to grasping the internal logic of our opponents’ worldview and the sources of its mass appeal, we examine anti-genderism as a coherent construct and moral sensibility deeply at odds with our own, but nonetheless deserving scholarly attention. At times we quote anti-genderists at length, giving them a chance to speak in their own voices.

This study builds on textual analysis of books and articles by key authorities in the European anti-gender circuit, including Gabrielle Kuby (2015) and Marguerite Peeters (2007, 2013), as well as their Polish counterparts such as Father Oko (2014) and Marzena Nykiel (2014) and others (e.g. *Dyktatura gender* 2014). We have also examined interviews with, and public statements by, key proponents of anti-genderism worldwide (including two popes, a number of local Catholic hierarchs and intellectuals, such as French priest and psychoanalyst Tony Anatrella or Guinean Cardinal and prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and

the Discipline of the Sacraments Robert Sarah), media coverage of anti-gender events, and various materials published on the websites of specific movements and organizations, such as the Polish network [www.stopgender.pl](http://www.stopgender.pl) or the international platforms such as [www.citizengo.org](http://www.citizengo.org) and [www.lifesitenews.com](http://www.lifesitenews.com). Additionally, we have participated in anti-gender rallies in Warsaw in 2015 and studied media reports and research on related mobilizations in other countries. These include the anti-LGBT and antifeminist backlash in Putin's Russia, Ukraine and Georgia; demonstrations against marriage equality in France in 2014 (La Manif Pour Tous), the rise of anti-gay violence and legislation in other regions, including some African countries (e.g. Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014), the role that controversies on gender equality played in the debates concerning the peace deal in Colombia in 2016, and the 2015 national debate on the use of public bathrooms by transgender people in the US. What interests us is the ideological framework linking these seemingly divergent phenomena. While our analysis focuses mostly on the Polish case, we strive to reconstruct the key tenets of anti-genderism as a strategy for social mobilization of relevance far beyond our local context.

### **Continuity and change: conceptualizing anti-gender mobilization**

Conservatives oppose gender on three levels: as a concept, as an ideology / theory, and as a social practice and political project (Case 2012, Favier 2015). In response, some scholars and commentators have employed broad terms such as “anti-gender mobilization” (Kováts and Pöim 2015) or “the war against gender” (Korolczuk 2014). Others focus on specific facets of the trend, which they define as “anti-feminism” (Szelewa 2014), an attack on gender studies (Grabowska 2013), opposition to gender equality (Hankivsky and Skoryk 2014), to gay marriage (Fassin 2014), or to “laws and policies concerning sexual and reproductive health and rights in the European Union” (Hodžic and Bijelic 2014). While different terms are used, it is clear by now that this phenomenon is not a local anomaly, but a transnational right-wing strategy, one that effectively employs the idea of the local and the authentic but is consistent and to some extent coordinated across borders (e.g. Grzebalska 2015, Korolczuk 2014, Kováts and Pöim 2015, Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, Paternotte 2014).

Due to its focus on reproductive rights and gender equality anti-gender mobilization has been interpreted as a continuation of resistance to feminism and as yet another stage in the culture wars—a global clash of pro-modern and anti-modern sensibilities (Bob 2012). In fact, anti-genderists also use the term “culture war,” presenting themselves as peaceful and

besieged, and warning against the alleged violence of genderists. For example right-wing German sociologist Gabrielle Kuby repeatedly uses combat-related words such as “weapon,” “battle,” “fight,” and “threat,” calling for resistance to “the 200-year cultural war to create autonomous, manipulable, controllable people” (2015: 17). A key issue in the culture wars has always been the politics of reproduction, as evidenced by the history of right-wing resistance to UN population policies (see e.g. Bob 2012; Buss 1998; Buss and Herman 2003; Favier 2015; Omang 2013). In recent decades these struggles have grown considerably more complex, partly because of fundamental changes in family configurations (e.g. homosexual families and falling fertility rates in Europe), and partly due to developments in the field of reproductive technologies, perceived as a threat to “natural order of things.” In some contexts, anti-gender mobilization includes strong opposition to assisted reproduction, thus it has been interpreted as reflecting the ideological conflict about the nature/culture frontier (Radkowska-Walkowicz in Stawiszyński 2013). Anti-gender pundits consider biomedical intervention in the human body as an extension of Malthusianism and eugenics, both of which they see as the foundation of contemporary transnational gender policies (Kuby 2015: 18-20, Nykiel 2014). Over the years, anti-gender theorists have strengthened the economic aspect of their argumentation: they view themselves as defenders of ordinary people against the corporate greed of pharmaceutical companies seeking to sell contraception and the medical establishment offering abortion and IVF (see e.g. Nykiel 2014: 27-50).

Another line of interpretation of the war on gender asserts that the core issue is the dismantling of gender binarism and the fate of hegemonic masculinity. Much like religious fundamentalists struggling to eradicate sex education from American schools (Irvine 2002), anti-gender campaigners in Poland became obsessed with the alleged threat to boys posed by sex-educators who, according to right-wing media, made them wear skirts (Duda 2016: 27, Graff 2014). Moral panics around the alleged destabilization of “natural” gender roles link anxieties about depopulation with grim visions of the end of patriarchy and men’s power (often referred to as a “masculinity crisis”). Anti-genderists promise to rejuvenate hegemonic masculinity and traditional fatherhood, which is why some masculinist movements, e.g. Polish fathers’ rights groups, have joined forces with anti-gender activists (Korolczuk and Hryciuk 2017). Currently, the struggles over masculinity can be interpreted as a facet of a class conflict at the core of new nationalist extremisms, which became visible in the wake of economic crisis of 2008. Anti-genderism at least partly reflects the growing frustration of men with no economic prospects who turn to patriarchal values rather than address the economic

sources of their misfortunes (cf. Wodecka 2013). Such a perspective helps to understand why some far right groups have joined the anti-gender crusade, but it is also important to avoid materialist reductionism. Anti-genderism clearly feeds on anxieties arising from the permanent state of precariousness produced by neoliberalism. However, such sentiments appeal not only to economically disadvantaged populations, but also—or in some contexts primarily—to the middle class.

Many scholars point to the crucial role of religious institutions, especially the Vatican, in combating gender (Buss and Herman 2003, Case 2012, Kuhar 2014). In fact, it seems worthwhile to think of the Vatican as the precursor of modern global institutions with enormous influence on the local level. This explains why the UN has been a target of attacks, viewed as a powerful yet illegitimate competitor, or in fact, an usurper. Marguerite Peeters warns that “the new concepts tend to occupy the space that should be occupied by evangelization. Christians preach human rights, sustainability and the Millennium Development Goals instead of preaching the gospel” (2007: 10). The conflict is thus not only about religion or ideological differences about power and legitimacy.

The Vatican’s opposition towards “genderism” is interpreted as a continuation of the Church’s war against the “civilization of death” and the 1990s resistance to what was then called the “gender agenda” (Butler 2004, Omang 2013, Favier 2015). What is new about the current phase is that the representatives of the clergy and Catholic commentators not only oppose women’s reproductive rights and stress the connection between family planning and LGBT rights, but also link both to the flaws of global capitalism. All three are said to be part of the same agenda, which supposedly leads to the destruction of family and ultimately to “the destruction of man” (Case 2012). Demonization of gender is also a novel strategy of the Church to discipline liberal Catholics in the aftermath of the pedophile scandals. According to Polish feminist theologian Zuzanna Radzik (2013) gender has become the new enemy of the illiberal wing of the Church, a generalized evil that to some extent replaces Jews and homosexuals as vilified groups accused of spreading corruption. In short, the war on gender appears as reaction to tensions within contemporary Catholicism, with anti-genderism as the new source of cohesiveness among Catholics. The conservative definition of the family becomes a new frontier, while dissenters are now positioned as those who have abandoned faith.

Anti-genderism, however, is much more than a reactionary trend within the Catholic Church: Muslim, evangelical, orthodox as well as non-denominational groups are also

involved. Thus, we propose to interpret anti-genderism as a political rather than a religious movement, one that effectively masks its political nature by appeals to dignity, theology and moral values. Clifford Bob's (2012) research on global right-wing activism, which emerged in response to gender equality agenda being promoted on transnational level, shows that it was already in Beijing that a loose-knit multi-denominational network of organizations and groups coalesced around "traditional family values." This alliance gradually evolved into what Bob calls a "Baptist-burqa" network, an interfaith alliance that cooperates internationally on different policy goals. Specific aims have included defending conservative Christians persecuted for home-schooling their children in Germany, providing legal and ideological support for legislation outlawing abortion in Nicaragua, and speaking against gay rights in Uganda (Bob 2012: 37-38, Kaoma 2012). Anti-gender rhetoric has been used to oppose the 2016 peace deal in Colombia, which was rejected for mentioning gender equality and sexual rights, and for including women's groups in the negotiations. It should be stressed, however, that not all groups which oppose feminism, gender equality or sexual democracy fall into the category of anti-genderists. What differentiates the anti-gender movement from extreme religious fundamentalists (such as ISIS in Middle East or Boko Haram in Nigeria) is that the former rejects the use of violence and views itself as defender of democracy in its original and true form.

Examined from this political perspective, the current war on gender reflects the nature of global civil society, which is ideologically diverse and conflict-oriented, with differences cutting across institutions and borders, and specific battles resulting in policy outcomes (Bob 2012: 5-7). This conceptual framework allows us to see transnational and local ideological and institutional connections. Locally the movement often has a grassroots character and builds on context-specific concerns, for example, the anti-gender mobilization that emerged in Poland around 2012 was viewed by some as an effort to cover up recent pedophilia scandals involving Polish clergy (Sierakowski 2014), while the French scenario was seen uniquely through the lens of struggles over marriage equality culminating in massive demonstrations of January 2013 (Fassin 2014). The key themes, however, such as the recurrent image of the child in danger and the critique of cosmopolitan elites, are commonly used by anti-genderists around the globe.<sup>5</sup> The activists and ideologues of the movement portray politics as evil and corrupt. By appealing to nostalgia for "natural" modes of living they tap into the anti-political *ressentiment* observed on both sides of the Atlantic (Bennett et al 2013). The core is movement not theological but political, it is a brand of populism, an illiberal one.



Critique of modernity and progress is an important part of transnational anti-gender discourse, but focus on culture and religion may be misleading in that it obscures some important political entanglements. Anti-gender alliances must be contextualized as part and parcel of global power struggles that are affected (and often disrupted) by tensions and realignments in international politics. We argue that the key to understanding the present phase of the culture wars is the post-1989 geopolitical landscape: Eastern Europe, Russia and the Global South are the key battlegrounds. While core documents of the movement include exhortations from the pope (Benedict XIV 2012), and while the key proponents of anti-genderism tend to be West Europeans (e.g. Tony Anatrella, Gabrielle Kuby, Marguerite Peeters), today interests of the Vatican, Christian fundamentalists in the US and European nationalists appear eerily convergent with those of Putin's Russia, which is perceived as a moral rejuvenator of the West. According to Kuby, "Russia is today the only country where there may be the possibility for church and state to rebuild the foundations of the family" (2014: 1).

One vivid example of how anti-genderism is contingent on global politics is the development of the World Congress of Families (WCF), a global network of pro-family and pro-life groups, founded in 1995 in the US, which today has more than 40 official partner organizations around the world, including Russia. All these groups are engaged in "efforts to protect the unborn, encourage marriage, reduce poverty, improve the health of children and adults, help orphans find homes, and eliminate human trafficking and prostitution" (*WCF Statement...*). American activists have closely cooperated with local groups in other countries, including Russia: they took part in organizing the first and the second World Demographic Summits both of which took place in Russia (at the Russian State Social University in 2011 and in Ulyanovsk in 2012) (see also Bob 2012: 42-43). On their Internet site they take pride in the accomplishments of Russian partners: in the eyes of the American WCF leaders Russia epitomizes the last frontier of true "family values" because "at a time when Western governments are moving backward to a pagan worldview, Russia has taken a leadership role to advance the natural family" (*Planning WCF*). Close collaboration between neoconservatives from Russia and the USA in 2012 was put to the test by changes in the global geo-political landscape: tensions between Russia and the US / EU due to the crisis in Crimea in 2014 and then the developments in Syria. Consequently, American leaders decided to withdraw from organizing the biennial conference which was to take place in 2014 in Moscow.<sup>6</sup>

Like the Vatican, the WCF strives to become the counterweight to the UN at least regarding population policies, but in the context of serious political tensions it has difficulty maintaining its identity as a global institution. The crisis in Eastern Ukraine has also significantly reduced the political opportunities of some local anti-EU, pro-Russian groups such as the “Parental Committee of Ukraine” (Strelnyk forthcoming). At the same time, new possibilities for transnational cooperation may open, as suggested by the words of admiration for Putin expressed by the then-presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2013 and since.

Clearly, what is at stake here is an uneasy balance between transnationalism and local embeddedness. What binds these actors together is a yearning for universalism, a world order that would displace what they perceive as the moral degradation and relativism of the contemporary “modern godless states” (Benedict XVI 2012:4). Right-wing groups link this goal to struggles for national sovereignty and democracy understood as “the real power of the people” (Bluhm 2016: 28). The ultimate goal of this movement is conceptualized as defending conservative “universal” values of the “modern West” against ongoing decay and degradation, epitomized by liberal ideals such as human rights, emancipation and individualism. In our view, it is the anti-colonial frame that helps to bridge anti-genderism’s internal tensions and inconsistencies, both political and ideological.

### **Defenders of the poor: how the right reconfigures gender as colonial imposition**

We have identified three elements that constitute the ideological core of anti-genderism:

- (1) A set of convictions about the nature of man, natural law and human dignity consistent with Christian dogma and radically antithetical to social constructionism. Although the base is theological, much care is taken to provide scientific grounding for anti-gender views on sex differences (neuro-psychology, brain sex, etc.) and to argue that gender studies are a scientific hoax.
- (2) A deeply pessimistic and consistently anti-modernist narrative of Western intellectual, cultural and social history. The West is said to have degenerated under the influence of Marx, Engels, Freud, the Frankfurt School, Feminism and Postmodernism; specific thinkers and activists (especially Margaret Sanger, Margaret Mead and Alfred Kinsey) are presented as degenerates and semi-criminals, guilty of innumerable lies. In the words of Kuby genderism is a movement:

fuelled by Marxist philosophers, particularly of the Frankfurt School in Germany. In their view, sexuality was to be liberated from restrictive morality—even from the taboo of incest. Sex between children, as well as sex *with* children, was to be allowed in order to create a “society without oppression” (Kuby 2014a).

A strong connection is traced between 1968 movements, “ideology of gender” and Malthusianism. The core idea of anti-genderism, in the words of Kuby, is that: “the deregulation of sexual norms leads to the destruction of culture” (Fantini 2013). It is post-socialist countries and the Global South that have proved somewhat resistant to this cultural change. Today, claim anti-genderists, they can save the West from spiritual and demographic suicide by defending what are presented as the original, universal Western values, referred to as Christian values and Christian civilization.

(3) An alarmist vision of the global distribution of power: Neo-Marxist globalists are said to have taken over the world by means of blackmail and manipulation masked by benevolent talk about public health and human rights. This sinister global force, supposedly funded by transnational corporations such as Amazon and Google, is described as a new form of colonialism, whose most vulnerable targets are the developing nations of Africa. Again, Eastern Europe is accorded a special place in this geography of gender, as a part of the world that was largely untouched by the sexual revolution.

The coherence of this worldview relies on three persistent equivalencies linking the cultural with the economic and the political: Western liberal elites are equated with the global political and economic elite; neoliberalism as a source of suffering and injustice is equated with individualism as a value system and ideological project; population and gender equality policies are interpreted as a new phase of global colonialism.

It is the third tenet of anti-genderism—its self-definition as resistance to new forms of cultural colonialism and neoliberal exploitation—that we see as crucial. Anti-genderists present themselves as protectors of the world’s colonized peoples, the disenfranchised and economically disadvantaged, whose livelihoods as well as authentic cultures and traditional value systems are threatened by neoliberal globalization. An unexamined assumption underlying this worldview is not only that local and authentic cultural identity is always socially conservative and heteronormative, but that gender conservatism constitutes this sovereign identity’s essential core. “Genderism” is thus construed as violence by the all-powerful elites, who aim to strip the people of their sovereignty. Anti-genderists view

themselves as defenders of an oppressed majority, as in the interview cited above, where the Pope stressed that “colonizing empires. . . seek to make peoples forget their own identity and make them (all) equal” (O’Connell 2015). The alleged colonizers are feminists, transnational NGOs, international bodies such as the UN and EU, the somewhat elusive “homosexual lobby,” or generally “the West,” as well as the power of global markets driven by what the Pope refers to as the “idolatry of money” (Pacewicz 2016). In the words of Kuby:

This global sexual revolution is now being carried out by power elites. These include international organizations like the United Nations and the European Union, with their web of inscrutable sub-organizations; global corporations like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft; the big foundations like Rockefeller and Guggenheim; extremely rich individuals like Bill and Melinda Gates, Ted Turner, Georges Soros, and Warren Buffett; and non-governmental organizations like the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the International Lesbian and Gay Association. . . . And they all share one interest: to reduce population growth on this planet. (Fantini 2013)

The key sites of neocolonial power are said to be transnational institutions: the UN, UNICEF, UNAIDS, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank, along with international foundations and associations, including the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Höjdestrand 2017, Nykiel 2014: 45, Strelnyk forthcoming). Anti-genderists are also deeply critical of existing civil society structures in the post-socialist region of Europe and so called developing countries, where many NGOs were founded by Western donors in the 1990s. As shown by Höjdestrand (2017), in the Russian context conservative grassroots parents’ movements activists attempt to re-configure the very notion of civil society along moral and religious coordinates, with patriotism, “traditional” religiosity, and the institution of heterosexual marriage as core values. This conservative, illiberal civil society legitimizes itself by references to the will of the people, as expressed in demonstrations and petitions, with “authentic” values opposed to dangerous abstractions promulgated by the corrupt elites (cf. Duda 2016: 21). These movements’ attitude towards democracy is, however, deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, anti-genderists oppose the very idea of democratic deliberation over the “natural order of things”: the gender order, marriage, filiation, reproduction, parental authority. On the other hand, they stress their reverence for democratic methods such as mass mobilization, citizens’ initiatives or referenda, which

express the will of the people and by which the contemporary “colonialism of gender” can be fought.

Global efforts that include reproductive health, family planning, gender equality and sexual rights are seen as a cover up for the Western neo-Malthusian project. The global elites’ alleged desire to prevent population growth by spreading homosexuality and “killing the unborn” is viewed as a legacy of the West’s self-destructive fixation on sexuality (the legacy of Freud, Marcuse, Kinsey and 1968). This message comes across with particular force when uttered by a native of Africa, such as Cardinal Robert Sarah, one of the key proponents of anti-genderism worldwide. Sarah has repeatedly warned against colonization by gender, which he compares to fundamentalist Islamism and ISIS: “To use a slogan, we find ourselves between “gender ideology and ISIS.” Islamic massacres and libertarian demands regularly contend for the front page of the newspapers” (Montagna 2015). He has also gone on record claiming that “gender ideology” is “a deadly impulse that is being experienced in the world increasingly cut off from God through ideological colonialism” (Mena 2016).

Anti-genderists view family planning as stemming also from corporate greed which drives global capitalism. UN’s depopulation policies imposed on national governments are said to bring profits to the “abortion industry” and pharmaceutical companies that sell contraception and offer IVF. Genderism is seen as a global force, while resistance is always presented as local. Thus, the set of values that anti-genderists aim to defend and preserve includes national sovereignty and economic autonomy. The main narrative promulgated by anti-gender activists and intellectuals stresses that the global liberal forces introduce eugenic depopulation politics, especially in poor, underdeveloped countries in Africa and Asia in order to strengthen their own economic and political position (e.g. Peeters 2013).

Close analysis of the local mutations of the anti-colonial frame reveals its remarkable fluidity and adaptability. Depending on the context, it may or may not involve explicit anti-Semitism; anti-genderists often express openly racist views but simultaneously accuse their opponents of racism. Michael E. Jones (2005), a notorious US based anti-Semite, proponent of the claim that the sexual revolution is a Jewish conspiracy, is repeatedly cited by both Polish anti-genderists and the internationally renowned Kuby (2015). Interestingly, however, when Kuby draws on his theories, she carefully omits references to Jewish origins of the alleged global plot, while repeatedly accusing “genderist elites” of racism.

Various aspects of the anti-colonial frame are highlighted by different groups engaged in anti-gender mobilization. Its main function is to create an atmosphere of moral blackmail.

Globally, the Western middle class is accused of colonizing the world's poor by imposing liberal values. In post-socialist countries anti-genderism often takes on an explicitly racist form, while in the US context the charge of colonization becomes the charge of race-based eugenics. When identifying key players on the “genderist” side, Kuby points to:

the rich and powerful of the United States, generally white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), who perceived the danger of “differential fertility.” They feared that the low birth rate of the upper class and the high birth rate of the underclass, especially blacks in the US and poor Third World countries, would cause them to lose political and economic power. (2015: 17)

Taken out of context, this passage could pass for left-wing anti-colonial discourse, with its heightened race and class consciousness, and a critique of population policies. This brings us to the question of the implications of the right-wing use of anti-colonial frame.

As many authors have pointed out, anti-colonialism has historically taken many forms in different contexts:

it is sometimes associated with an ideology of racial liberation ... it may accompany a demand for a recognition of cultural differences on a broad and diverse front ... [and] was often articulated in terms of a radical, Marxist discourse of liberation. (Ashcroft 2000:12, see also Warren 2017)

Scholars who, like ourselves, have examined the conservative uses of postcolonial theory in contemporary Poland conclude that it is an inherent problem with postcolonialism itself that makes the seemingly hostile takeover unavoidable: namely, the tendency to essentialize cultures, and to validate authenticity and the local at the expense of the foreign and universal (Snochowska-Gonzalez 2012, Bill 2014). They also highlight the tendency of postcolonial theory to define imperialism mainly in cultural terms while disregarding material reality (Snochowska-Gonzales 2012:720). Stanley Bill asserts that “postcolonial theory defends the specificity of local cultures but in doing so it risks falling into a form of ‘culturalism’” (2014: 6). A similar argument about postcolonial theory is put forth by other scholars, such as Vivek Chibber, whose controversial book on Subaltern Studies predicts that “while postcolonialism presents itself as the new face of radical critique, as the leading edge of criticism in an age of

global capitalism, its arguments resurrect key pillars of conservative ideology” (2013: 286). The case of Poland shows that the notion of colonization is infinitely pliable in right wing discourse, and it can be effectively used in countries with no obvious colonial history as a powerful signifier for humiliation which needs to be resisted.

### **Linking Ebola with Brussels: Poland as victim and savior**

The Polish case shows how eclectic the anti-gender discourse can be, capitalizing on a rhetoric of both victimhood and cultural superiority. This is exemplified by one of the banners displayed during a large anti-sex education rally held on 30 August 2015 in Warsaw. In crude English, the sign announced: “Gender + Convention about so called ‘violence against the women and violence in the family’ this is the Ebola for Poland from Brussels.” Ebola, a virus spread through contact with body fluids, causing vomiting, diarrhea and rash, is commonly associated with tropical regions of sub-Saharan Africa. In the context of the right-wing rally, the word Ebola epitomizes fear of the abject and the racially Other. By linking the horrible African disease with the European Union’s gender equality legislation (the Istanbul Convention), Polish right-wing populists strive to undermine generally positive attitudes towards the EU. Brussels is positioned here as a colonizer and a source of contagion, as it spreads the virus of genderism, aiming to destroy the healthy body of the Polish nation.

The choice of an African disease may seem odd, but is by no means accidental. Certain nationalist groups assert that Poles are being targeted as the last frontier of “undamaged Christianity” and “true moral values” in Europe, while the real purpose of global elites is to enable mass migration from Africa to Central and Eastern Europe (Nykiel 2014). The ultimate danger awaiting Poles is the destruction of the nation and construction of a new type of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society, which is envisioned as easily controllable and unable to oppose transnational institutions and local agents of the “civilization of death.” Such conspiracy theories are legitimate political currency in today’s Poland, as exemplified by the public statement of Paweł Kukiz, an MP and former presidential candidate who received over 20 percent of popular votes in the first phase of the May 2015 elections. Commenting on the ongoing refugee crisis, he asserted that EU migration policies are in fact aimed at extermination of the Polish nation:

The plan is for Poles to be scattered around the world, and a compilation of different ethnic groups is supposed to live here. Such a society would be easy to manipulate and

will create a “natural moat” [buffer zone] between the East and the West. Maybe we are supposed to just abandon these lands, maybe we are supposed to die out. (Kukiz 2015)

These two narratives—the one that identifies the peoples of Africa as victims of a global conspiracy and the one placing Poles in this role, a nation to be replaced by Africans—may appear mutually exclusive. In fact, however, they converge in their valorization of ethnic and national homogeneity and local rootedness, as well as in their vilification of Western elites. “Gender ideology” is perceived as an aggressive pseudo-religion, whose success depends on the previous uprooting of indigenous value systems. According to Kuby:

Rootless, dependent, malleable masses may be ready to celebrate a new—global—savior. The cultural revolution of our time increasingly limits individual freedom and broadens the power of the state over the individual and of international organizations over the states—in the service of the financial oligarchy and for toppling the moral order. (2015: 278)

“Genderism” is thus portrayed as a criminal plot aimed at demoralizing and eventually eradicating entire populations, but the definition of those in danger is broad enough to encompass all traditional, heterosexual families around the globe.

Within the imagined moral geography of anti-genderism Central and Eastern Europe in general, and Poland in particular, enjoy a privileged position. Whereas some right-wing ideologues in the region have identified genderism as a left-over from communism (e.g. Nykiel and Oko), this view is in fact entirely consistent with the narrative of Western colonization expounded by others, e.g. Kuby and Peeters. The colonizer is not the West as such but the West whose healthy (Christian) core has been destroyed by neo-Marxism and feminism already in the 1960s. Eastern Europe and Poland are singled out as the region whose inhabitants are aware of the dangers of Marxism and communism, and hence are able to oppose the global colonizers. Thus, the region is routinely praised and congratulated for the strength of its resistance by both European and American figures. In the words of Kuby:

A new totalitarianism is developing under the cloak of freedom (...) now the East European countries are becoming aware of this trend, and my book seems to be helping awaken people. The destruction has not gone as far here and people are



motivated to resist it. My great hope is that these East European countries will become a stronghold of resistance in the European Union. (2014b: 1).

Such praise is much appreciated by local exponents of the movement. Prominent Polish anti-gender author Marzena Nykiel ends her book with a quotation from Michael Jones's enthusiastic affirmation of Poland's special mission in the global culture war:

It is Poland's calling to save the West. Jan Sobieski came to Vienna with his cavalry and thus saved the West and saved Christianity. Now there is a new enemy at our gates. The new enemy is Wilhelm Reich and sexual education. The world looks to Poland with hope that Poland shall save the West once again (Nykiel 305).

The excesses of right wing rhetoric should not blind us to political significance of such exchanges. For a long time, Poland and other post-socialist countries appeared to many Western observers as "laggards" in regard to gender equality and sexual democracy, but to the right wingers we are the world's avant-garde and possibly a savior. Given the current rise of gendered nationalism and illiberal populism in countries such as United States or France, it is high time to go beyond the view that liberal democracy will thrive worldwide. We argue that Poland has become a key battleground in reactionary effort to "save" civilization from genderism not only because it is a Catholic country, but also because here the right has already been successful in mobilizing the anxieties resulting from neoliberal reforms by playing on anti-elitist resentment. Politically, what has followed the wave of anti-genderism is Law and Justice Party regime: an authoritarian and conservative version of welfare state, with pro-natalist policies, cash transfers to parents and a strong focus on heterosexual family (Graff and Korolczuk 2017). Thus, Poland should not be seen as an exceptional or provincial case but rather a paradigmatic one, and an important predictor for possible future developments in western Europe.

### **Discussion: theoretical and political implications for feminism**

As an ideological construct, anti-genderism interpellates subjects as victims of a global conspiracy, manipulated by the neoliberal elites targeting their true nature as men, women and children, as mothers and fathers. This idea is used to present new religious conservatism and right-wing populism as legitimate and just, helping to mobilize individuals on a mass scale in what appears as a vastly de-politicized modern world. This new ideological configuration, one that links gender conservatism and critique of neoliberalism, has profound consequences for any attempt on the left to develop effective strategies to counteract right-wing populism.

The consequences of our findings for feminist theory and organizing are profound, urgent and somewhat unsettling. First, it is useful to consider certain intriguing affinities between anti-gender discourse and recent interventions in feminist theory concerning the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism. The anti-genderist conceptualization of feminism, equating it with rampant individualism, with feminists as heralds of neoliberal globalization, is reminiscent of Nancy Fraser's influential argument about the "perverse subterranean elective affinity" between feminism and neoliberalism (Fraser 2009:108, see also Charkiewicz and Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2009, McRobbie 2009).<sup>7</sup> While acknowledging her critics objections that her narrative overgeneralizes the faults of contemporary US feminism and elides the heterogeneity of women's movements worldwide (Aslan and Gambetti 2011, Funk 2012), we nonetheless share Fraser's concern that "the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave [of feminism], salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society" (2009: 99). Her pessimistic diagnosis is accurate as far as the internationally successful part of Western feminism is concerned—precisely the part caricatured as "colonialist" by the anti-gender movement. Leftist critics of feminism's affinity with, or seduction by, neoliberalism view the two as separate currents that converged in some contexts and at a certain point in time, a development they perceive as an unfortunate anomaly, a betrayal of the original spirit of feminism as a movement for social justice. This is also our view of the matter. From the right-wing perspective, the story is much simpler: feminism has always been part and parcel of the neoliberal project, which sells rampant individualism as emancipation, corroding community and family. Obviously, the proposed solutions to the neoliberal crisis are also irreducibly different: socialist reforms in one case and gender retraditionalization in the other. Where the two critiques of neoliberalism converge is in their concern with the undervaluing of care, the dismantling of welfare provisions and the effects of these trends on women and families. We are profoundly skeptical about the possibility of dialogue or cooperation with anti-genderists, but we do believe that the current political configuration opens up new possibilities for feminist strategizing. Paradoxically, right-wing populism has ushered the problematic and care of parenthood into public debate, which may be seen as an entry point for feminists activists to re-claim the territory of care, social provisions, welfare and community.

Our analysis may also have serious implications for the decades-long alliance between feminism and postcolonial theory. Our findings are compatible with some critiques of the

inherent flaws of postcolonial theory, but do not depend on them. It is of secondary importance to our study whether or not conservative uses of postcolonial theory are interpreted as a hostile takeover or as an inevitable effect of features of the theory itself. The key point is that this emergent trend can effectively undermine advances of both transnational and local feminisms and left-wing movements around the globe. Those on the liberal left who believe that postcolonial theory offers tools to effectively counteract illiberal forces need to acknowledge that the anti-colonial frame is routinely being put to use by the right-wing forces, and with remarkable success. To grasp the implications of this trend is to acknowledge that we are facing an entirely new political reality.

## **Conclusion**

The war on gender is not just another wave of backlash, one that may be peculiar to the post-socialist context. Nor is it simply a new tactic of the Vatican in its ongoing efforts to undermine gender equality. It is not business as usual but a new ideological and political configuration, a transnational phenomenon with outposts both West and East. While the backlash of the 80s and 90s combined neo-conservatism with market fundamentalism (which is to some extent still the case with neoconservative Christian fundamentalists in the US and elsewhere), the new wave of illiberal populism links gender conservatism with a critique of neoliberalism and globalization. This combination has remarkable ideological coherence and great mobilizing power: right-wing populists have captured the imagination and hearts of large portions of local populations more effectively than progressive movements have managed to do.

The anti-colonial frame plays a central role in the war against gender, and more broadly in the contemporary resurgence of illiberal populism. It is not just a rhetorical embellishment, but a set of beliefs crucial to the coherence of anti-genderism as an ideology and to the movement's identity as a coalition of diverse groups within and across national boundaries. It also affects the movement's strategic choices, alliances and forms of mobilization.

Firstly, the anti-colonial frame determines targets selected for specific anti-gender campaigns: they tend to be transnational bodies and policies regarding gender equality. Anti-genderism is deeply suspicious not only of global/transnational institutions but also of national governments, which are accused of collusion with genderists, e.g. by implementing transnational treaties on gender equality. Secondly, the anti-colonial frame allows for

alliances between nationalists in various locations: it is always the local, authentic, indigenous culture, the local traditional family (whatever its tradition) that is under threat and in need of protection. Anti-colonialism is a populist meta-discourse that trumps local particularisms and geopolitical conflicts; it presents itself as an effort to defend ordinary people, the poor, the helpless, the abused against a network of corrupt global elites. Finally, skillful use of anti-colonial frame allows for successful mobilization at the grassroots. It appeals to constituencies that had not previously construed themselves in political terms, such as parents (Fábíán and Korolczuk 2017). Conservative parenthood has emerged globally as a new political identity, a site of social solidarity and a form of resistance in relation to the state, transnational institutions, the market, and feminism, which is viewed here primarily as a form of individualism. Within this framework, feminism is presented as an integral part of neoliberalism, while the traditional family becomes the last frontier of resistance, a place where there is still hope and a sense of community. It is a narrative with enormous affective power, one that endows subjects with a sense of dignity and collective agency, while at the same time giving voice to anxiety, which results from increasingly precarious working and living conditions under global capitalism.

Relying on anti-colonial frame, the right has undermined the left-wing monopoly on voicing critique towards capitalism and offered a new version of cultural universalism, an illiberal one. In short, anti-genderism has become the new language of anti-capitalist mobilization. This may seem paradoxical from the American perspective, given the persistent alliance between neoconservatism and neoliberalism in the USA (cf. Brown 2006), but the US may be an exception rather than the rule. Globally, contemporary right-wing movements and ideologies tend to be illiberal and populist rather than neoconservative. At the core of their worldview is an equation between neoliberalism and individualism as a value system and ideological project which heralds human rights and gender equality to colonize the world's impoverished nations. In effect, right-wing critique of neoliberalism and globalization takes the shape of anti-feminist mobilization, and employs the anti-colonial frame as its key discursive strategy.

With ultra-conservatives claiming the language of anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism, what are the prospects for feminist mobilizations and vocabularies? While feminists, mostly from the Global South, have long critiqued the discourse of universal human rights and the neo-colonial elements in UN population policies, today it is clear that a wholesale rejection of universalism plays into the hands of right-wing populists. We do not

offer a solution to this dilemma, but our analysis suggests the need to rethink feminist critiques of universal<sup>8</sup>ism in the world where the hegemony of liberal democracy can longer be taken for granted.

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<sup>1</sup> We define illiberal populism as ideological orientation, based on “a nativist concept of belonging, linked to a chauvinist and racilized concept of ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’” (Wodak 2015: 47), inherently anti-elitist and anti-expert, hostile to individualism and minority rights which are the core tenants of liberal democracy (see also Ekiert 2012 on illiberal civil society and Zakaria 1997 on illiberal democracy).

<sup>2</sup> We employ the concept of framing following social movements scholars who identify frames as social schemata of interpretation which “render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action” (Benford and Snow 2000: 614). Framing theory highlights “the symbolic and meaning work done by movement activists as they articulate grievances, generate consensus ... and present

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rationalities for their actions and proposed solutions to adherents, bystanders, and antagonists” (Williams 2008: 93). We show that anti-genderists deploy symbols and identities which are key to postcolonial theory, but they do not subscribe to this theoretical strand; in fact, some may not be aware of its existence. Thus, in our analysis, the anti-colonial is not equivalent to post-colonial.

<sup>3</sup> We have participated in meetings, workshops, and public discussions organized as part of two international networks: “Anti-Gender Crusades in Europe: Mobilizations against Equality” initiated by the Ebert Foundation in Budapest and coordinated by David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, and “Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise” initiated and coordinated by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin.

<sup>4</sup> These organizations include: the Polish Women’s Congress, Political Critique, Polish Gender Society, Action Democracy and the informal Women’s 8<sup>th</sup> of March Alliance. We also collaborate with “For Our Children” [Dla Naszych Dzieci], a single mothers’ association demanding child-support reform, and we have both written extensively on motherhood from a feminist perspective.

<sup>5</sup> In Poland, an important site of anti-gender mobilization was mass parental resistance to the government’s plans to lower compulsory school age from 7 to 6 in 2009-2015. The protesters joined forces with anti-genderists, who were contesting sex education in schools and the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). While the school age controversy was specific to Poland, the campaign’s main slogan “Save the Little Ones!” as well as the imagery employed resonated with conservative moral panics worldwide. In a variety of contexts “genderists” have been portrayed as sexual predators who pose a deadly threat to children (Duda 2016: 187, Höjdestrand 2017).

<sup>6</sup> The organization’s Managing Director Larry Jacobs issued a statement claiming that the International Forum “Large Families – The Future of Humanity” held in Moscow in September 2014 was not part of the official WCF events. The 2015 Congress took place in Utah, in the USA. Commenting on these developments, representatives of WCF strove to maintain a friendly distance towards the US government, claiming that their presence in the US “should not be construed as supporting all the policies of the Obama administration.” They insisted that their loyalty lies not with governments but with “people who are working to make a difference to promote a natural family and the dignity of the whole person” (*Planning WFC*).

<sup>7</sup> In a 2013 *Guardian* article Fraser made her case even more forcefully: “In a cruel twist of fate, I fear that the movement for women’s liberation has become entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society. That would explain how it came to pass that feminist ideas that once formed part of a radical

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worldview are increasingly expressed in individualist terms. Where feminists once criticised a society that promoted careerism, they now advise women to ‘lean in.’ A movement that once prioritised social solidarity now celebrates female entrepreneurs. A perspective that once valorised ‘care’ and interdependence now encourages individual advancement and meritocracy” (Fraser, 2013).