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“Ebola from Brussels”: anti-genderism, right-wing populism and the future of transnational feminism.

ELA:

For decades, transnational feminism operated on the assumption of progress: things were getting better, liberal democracy was spreading. Eastern European feminists shared this optimism. Meanwhile, things have gotten worse, a fact that may be more visible in Warsaw than in Göttingen, but is equally true here. The title of this conference speaks of “Confronting Hegemonies and Dispossession”. Indeed, we all seem to share a sense of danger, perhaps even doom. The populist right has not only taken over Hungary, Poland, the US and Turkey, but has won the hearts of millions of people in countries like Germany, France and Sweden.

Gender scholars and feminists are under threat all over the world. Here are a few emblematic examples:

In August 2018 the Hungarian government announced its plan to ban gender studies in both public and private universities, claiming that it no longer wishes to finance these educational activities, as graduates have no jobs anyway. Due to international pressure, they have since backed out of this plan, but obviously this is just the beginning.

In October 2017 an effigy of Judith Butler was burnt by protesters against her visit in Brasil. Over 370.000 people signed the petition calling for cancelling her lecture and the conference she co-organized in Sao Paulo.

In August 2017 the Supreme Court of Justice in Peru ruled that including “gender ideology” in school curricula is illegal as it violates parents’ rights to decide about their children’s upbringing. (By the way **terrified children** are a common theme for antigender campaigns around the world)

In 2017 Polish gender scholars were targetted by Ordo Iuris Institute, an ultra-conservative organization with links to both Brasil and Russia, demanding that rectors of public universities provide a **list – we might say a BLACKLIST-** of gender studies scholars, whom anti-genderists accuse of promoting pedophilia. Attacks on GS are also well-known to you in Germany and other countries.

A few years ago such events might have seemed insular, but viewed together they add up to a **transnational campaign at the intersection of culture and politics.**

AGNIESZKA

Anti-genderism is a **TRANSNATIONAL** response to globalization, a strategic effort coordinated by well-funded, well-connected actors operating on a transnational scale. Three large organizations illustrate the types of strategies that anti-genderists employ:

The World Congress of Families, recently renamed as The International Organization for the Family, is a global network of self-identified pro-family and pro-life groups. It was founded in 1997 in the US, and – like the Vatican – it strives to become the **counterweight to the UN**, at least regarding population policies. So far, there have been 11 congresses all over the world, with numbers of participants ranging from 700 in Prague in 1997 to almost 4000 in Warsaw in 2007.

Another powerful institution is the online platform **CitizenGO** founded in Spain in 2013, which mobilizes people through online petitions in 12 languages. The site boasts over 9.000.000 registered users, poised to defend “life, family, and liberty.” Recent campaigns have included an effort to stop the Netflix animated series *Super Drags*, mobilizing people in Ireland to keep abortion illegal, and opposing the depenalization of homosexuality in Kenya.

Our third example is a network called **Agenda Europe**. According to Neil Datta’s report, it includes over one hundred organizations from thirty European countries. The goal is to re-frame the conflict, using strategies of their opponents: positioning themselves as victims of discrimination and intolerance against Christians, or ‘Christianophobia’ (Datta 15). Agenda Europe’s manifesto recommends “**colonization of human rights**”, that is reframing ultra-conservative religious positions on sex and reproduction to sound like human rights language. It also encourages ‘contaminating’ language, and entering key UN and EU institutions to become “a respected interlocutor at the international level” (Datta 18).

The good news is that it is no longer possible to think seriously about politics and ignore gender. This is equally true for the new populist right and those on the liberal left who want to effectively oppose it. **Gender is at the heart of what is happening today.** But now the right is trying hard to re-define the meaning of the word.

ELA: What do right wing activists mean when they say GENDER? The magic of “gender” as a concept used by the populist right that it merges diverse issues into **one sinister idea**. Whereas in the 80s and 90s the main target of right-wingers was feminism, today it is “gender”, which functions as a quasi-metaphysical entity, a powerful evil force, the equivalent of the **Devil in middle ages or modernism in the fascist 1930s**.

Anti-gender movements are remarkably flexible and broad in scope, in some countries they mobilize around abortion, in others on homosexuality and protection of “natural family”, and in yet others they are positioned against trans people. Other issues include gendered violence, reproductive technologies, euthanasia and divorce. This flexibility has also a political use – as Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Peto have argued, gender has become a **“symbolic glue”**, allowing religious and political actors to work together. For example, it facilitates the cooperation of nationalist groups from different countries, allowing some **fascists groups** to join a network that features an **orthodox rabbi** as one of its main speakers – that happened at the opening of the World Congress of Families in Utah in 2015.

For the populist right, “genderism” has become a flexible signifier for all that is wrong with the contemporary world: not just changes in the gender order, low fertility rates but also social inequality, precarity and the arrogance of the elites. The new wave of reactionary mobilization against gender, in progress since around 2010, is a broad movement that operates on **two levels**: political and academic. We will examine both, focusing on the anti-genderism’s links to right-wing populism and on the cultural geography of this trend.

We argue that this movement, while selectively borrowing from liberal-left and feminist discourses – the discourse of RIGHTS, strives to construct **a new universalism, an illiberal one**. Its progress has serious implications for feminist theory and activism. We need to rethink some of our core assumptions; we need to regroup as a movement and build a new affective as well as effective solidarity across borders.

But we don’t come to you only as messengers from the darker side of Europe. We also have something to say about effective feminist organizing: Poland’s Black Protests deserve to be examined not just as a desperate response to right-wing extremism, but also as massive feminist mobilization in its own right.

To make sense of the attacks on “gender” and respond to them adequately, we need to understand how they fit into the broader march of the populist right worldwide. In the next half hour, **we will present our conceptualization of anti-genderism in 6 concise points**.

1. AGNIESZKA: POPULISM

Antigenderism is a crucial component of current political changes and struggles. There is a close affinity between the anti-gender movement and the broader trend of right wing populism. This affinity goes **beyond** the question what enables cooperation between different nationalist groups. We agree with Chantal Mouffe claims that **populism is not an ideology but a mode of articulation of “the people”** and their claims as opposed to elites – the oligarchy. We argue that anti-genderism lends right-wing populist forces **ideological coherence** that populism lacks, as well as an **affective force** rooted in a sense of victimization and moral superiority.

It is a **mistake** to interpret this trend as the continuation of what Wendy Brown termed **“the American nightmare”**, the persistent alliance between neoconservatism + neoliberalism. This frame may still be valid in the US, but not in Europe and Latin America. **In these contexts, anti-genderism fuels a broader populist trend.** Its internal logic is in fact **a populist logic**. The core element is not obedience to God, but a **rebellion against godless elites**: intellectual, political and economic. And its promise is to defend the simple folks, such as parents concerned about the wellbeing of their children, against excesses and perversions of gender imposed on them by a transnational elite. Anti-genderism has effectively mobilized the masses, convinced people that they are being attacked, shamed and humiliated.

It is an affective politics. These people are **angry**, and it is beside the point whether they have been manipulated; the point is that **their anger is real** and has real political effects. We should make an effort to avoid thinking of people who join these movements as dupes or as hopelessly conservative; if we look at **parental movements**, we understand that anti-genderism feeds on the failures of the neoliberal policies of care, the post-2008 crisis, the failure of national governments and transnational structures to deal with pressures of globalization. In many contexts the family has become the last frontier of solidarity. What antigenderism does is to assure people that only the traditional family model will protect them.

2. ELA: NOT JUST RELIGIOUS

Anti-genderism is more than a religious movement, even though most of these organizations adhere to “Christian values” and have links to organized religion. It is true that the Vatican is a key player - Sarah Bracke and David Paternotte convincingly argue that the concept of “gender ideology” has been invented and popularized by the Catholic church to link vital concerns regarding gender order, family and sexuality, which for a long time were not necessarily a part of the same conversation. However, the movement is *more than as an emanation of Catholic theology and Vatican’s foreign policy*. With the growth of Evangelical movements, especially outside Europe, and international engagement of Russian Orthodox church, we are now dealing with a complex network.

According to Clifford Bob, in the 90s, transnational coalition of conservative religious groups took the form of a **Baptist-Burka network**, including some Muslim groups. Today – due to the rise of islamophobia and the refugee crisis – mostly Christian denominations cooperate and network. This **complicated matrix is highly dependent on political developments**, with Russia and the US featuring prominently as leaders and advisers, but also with Latin American and Eastern European outposts.

Moreover, there is a **secular strand of anti-genderism**, exemplified by attacks on gender studies scholars in Germany and Sweden. As shown by Paula Irene-Villa, **assaults on gender studies as unscientific**, often rely “on an overtly narrow, positivist and exclusively experimental notion of scientific knowledge.” (2017: 111).

In some counties, **ideological attacks have been justified in economic terms**: gender studies departments are described as “inefficient” and nonproductive not only in Hungary, but also in Sweden, where a famous political scientist made this argument a few years ago. Allegedly, GS scholars are not publishing enough articles in high-impact and our departments fail to produce employable graduates. What we see here is a **synergy between right-wing moralism and neoliberal logic** as applied to academia, but these arguments do not necessarily come from the same actors.

3. AGNIESZKA: ACADEMY/Alternative knowledge/anti-gender studies)

We all see anti-genderism's growing presence in **the academy**. Initially, many commentators viewed this as a form of willful ignorance, stemming from the lack of knowledge of what gender theory stands for. It is now clear that such an interpretation is mistaken. Anti-genderism claims to be **a coherent worldview and an area of expertise**. It claims to be "rational" and legitimizes itself "scientifically". In the words of Sarah Bracke and David Paternotte: "these oppositions to gender can be read as **projects of alternative knowledge production**".

We read the movement's activities as an ambitious plan to establish a new paradigm in the social sciences: an essentialist and foundationalist one. This worldview is based on a set of fundamental truths about human nature, sexuality, family and society, presented as rooted in science and natural law. As Roman Kuhar observed "the Church's discourse (and its public appearance) seems to be 'secularizing': the Bible is substituted by science and the Church itself by civil society proxies".

Attacks on gender studies must be seen as part of **a broader crisis of legitimation of academic knowledge**. It includes such complex phenomena as devaluation of expertise coming from academia, overproduction of knowledge and hyper-specialization, as well as profound changes in the media landscape. Anti-genderism is a symptom of this change, and the movement taking advantage of it.

Profoundly suspicious of existing academic institutions, anti-genderism strives to build up its own sources of legitimacy, a body of knowledge and its own pantheon of intellectual celebrities, many of them women. Books are published, lectures are given, online courses and workshops are offered, and academic conferences are organized at institutions of higher learning. The scale of this educational effort is remarkable. As Maciej Duda documents, in Poland during 2015 alone the Association of Catholic Families organized over 120 meetings for parents concerned about the "sexualization of children".

It seems that anti-genderists are not set to destroy gender studies as such but **replace critical thinking of this category with an essentialist and moralistic discourse**. Perhaps we should not be surprised: second wave feminism established itself in the academic world in the form of gender studies, similarly, the present wave of anti-feminist activism seeks to legitimize itself by establishing *anti-gender studies*.

ELA: Our last 3 points concern the geo-political dimension of anti-genderism, focusing on the moral geography underlying the movement.

4. ANTICOLONIAL FRAME

Anti-genderism owes much of its rhetorical force to the persistent use of the anti-colonial frame. Gender is presented as a sinister global force, while resistance is always seen as local. Thus, the set of values that anti-genderists aim to defend and preserve includes national sovereignty and economic autonomy. In this framework, family planning is not only immoral but also stems from the **corporate greed which drives global capitalism**. UN population policies imposed on national governments are said to bring profits to the “abortion industry” and pharmaceutical companies that sell contraception and hormones used in IVF treatment. Global liberal forces are said to introduce **eugenic depopulation policies** especially in poor, underdeveloped countries in Africa and Asia in order to strengthen their own economic and political position. **Globally, the Western middle class is accused of colonizing the world’s poor by imposing liberal values.** Within this framework, Judith Butler on a visit to Sao Paulo appears as modern day cultural conquistador.

The metaphor of colonization is key to the coherence of the anti-genderism. This worldview relies on **three persistent equivalencies** linking the cultural with the economic and the political:

- Western liberal elites – the colonizers - 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 (“ideological colonization” as Pope Francis has repeatedly called it);
- population and gender equality policies are interpreted as a key strategy of global colonialism.

Anti-genderists often express **openly racist views but simultaneously accuse their opponents of racism**. It is not a coincidence that Judith Butler and George Soros became the hated symbols of colonizing elites. Anti-genderism is at least partly an heir of **anti-Semitic conspiracy theories** as well as theories linking Jews to homosexuality and perversion, which originate in 19th century Germany and France. But the main function of the anti-colonial frame is to create an atmosphere of moral blackmail and to disrupt the language of human rights by co-opting its core concepts.

5. Agnieszka: ANTI-EU?

Among the transnational institutions named as colonizers, the European Union features most prominently. Hence, it is useful to think of anti-genderism as a political campaign **oriented against European Union, strongly supported by Putin's Russia and religious fundamentalists in the US**. As mentioned above, anti-gender organizations aim to infiltrate EU institutions; simultaneously, at a grassroots level, the movement has a strong anti-EU component.

This is exemplified by one of the banners displayed during a large anti-sex education rally held in 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 Africa. In the context of the right-wing rally, the word Ebola is meant to evoke fear of the racial Other, but also of powerful European institutions. It stresses the relative helplessness of the local population in danger of being “infected”. The right-wing populists link the horrible African disease with the European Union's gender equality legislation (the Istanbul Convention), to undermine generally positive attitudes towards the EU. Brussels is positioned as source of contagion: it spreads the virus of genderism, aiming to destroy the healthy body of the Polish nation.

6. ELA: Geography

The East-West divide plays an important role in the moral geography of European anti-genderism. In the anti-gender imaginary, Central and Eastern Europe in general, and Poland in particular, enjoy a privileged position. Some right-wing ideologues in the region have identified genderism as a left-over from communism but 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 was destroyed in the 60s by the sexual revolution.** Eastern Europe is singled out as the region whose inhabitants are aware of the dangers of Marxism and communism. Hence, they are able to oppose the global colonizers. In the words of Gabrielle 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).

In 2014-2015 the Polish campaign against “genderism” was partly displaced by and partly merged with panic over Europe’s refugee crisis. **It was the ability to combine the two themes that paved the way to the Law and Justice party electoral victory in 2015.** “Genderists” along with refugees (now referred to as “invaders” and “terrorists”) were demonized as enemies of the nation, an international conspiracy threatening Polish culture and threatening the safety of Polish borders. Moral panic around gender combined seamlessly with “enemies at the gates” rhetoric. It was about more than a threat of “our women” being raped by racialized hypermasculine others, though this theme was present as well, especially following the events in Cologne. **Genderism was also presented as a plot to “soften” Polish men and make them unable to defend the country.** There was also the theme of demographic catastrophe: with Polish men going “soft” and Polish women becoming feminists, Poland would soon be depopulated. In the summer of 2016 a right-wing y Polish weekly featured the cover you now see on the screen: “Islamic rape of Europe.” Does this image and the story behind it sound familiar in your context as well?

AGNIESZKA: Conclusions

The consequences of all this for feminist theory and organizing are urgent and somewhat unsettling. Feminists need to recognize the power of these movements, the reality of the threat. We do not own the language of human rights anymore, and we need to rethink our discursive strategies for the future.

First: without despair and without self-flagellation, we should consider whether feminism itself has contributed to the present crisis. There is an intriguing affinity between anti-gender discourse and the feminist critique of the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism. Anti-genderists routinely equate feminism with rampant individualism; to them, feminists are heralds of neoliberal globalization. This claim is reminiscent of Nancy Fraser's argument about the "perverse subterranean elective affinity" between feminism and neoliberalism. While rejecting the anti-gender interpretation, we need to consider the possibility that the current wave of populism is connected to the crisis in feminism – a crisis that opens up new possibilities for feminist strategizing.

Second: Anti-gender victories are not inevitable, even in countries where the populist right is in power, like Poland. So far, the Ordo Iuris Institute's efforts to ban abortion in Poland have been unsuccessful, due to the mass mobilization of Polish women. We can win this battle, the question is how? **We believe feminism needs to take back the language of values and emotions.** It needs to embrace **pathos**. Women's Strike in Poland has been most successful when it employed categories such as DIGNITY, AUTONOMY and SOLIDARITY OF WOMEN and fueled this message with expressions of anger and pain, but also with feminist knowledge and expertise.

The new paradigm requires **closer cooperation between academic and activist circles**. We have said it for decades and many of us practiced it in their everyday lives but gender studies slid nonetheless into increased specialization and detachment from social justice struggles. It is a question we need to ask ourselves: do we imagine feminist scholarship as another field of academic inquiry or are we really committed to serving the social movement which brought gender studies to life?

The third lesson from the gender wars concerns the East-West divide in European feminism. We have alerted you to the role of “moral geography” in anti-gender discourse and politics. What are its consequences for our thinking?

Obviously, we should not mimic anti-gender thinking, privileging the East, vilifying the West. Nor does it make sense to ritualistically dis-identify ourselves from “Western liberal Feminism” – as has become a tendency in transnational academic feminism. What we need is not more guilt or a new hierarchy, but a new paradigm. The task before us is to face the new reality where liberal democracy as such is crumbling. In this sense, **our Eastern European experiences are paradigmatic rather than parochial.**

As Clare Hemmings argues, feminism is in urgent need of an **AFFECTIVE solidarity** – a departure from identity politics, an effort to embrace transformation. Affective solidarity would lead a German feminist to view Black Marches in Warsaw and Women’s March in Washington DC as part of the same mobilization. It would result in a feminist from France watching news from Hungary with real engagement. Solidarity across borders is not the same as “global sisterhood”. This time, we need to work hard to avoid the pitfalls of Eurocentism, racism and naïve essentialism. This time, we know better than to universalize the experience of white middle-class women. **But we do need to acknowledge that women’s rights are inevitably a form of universalism, one based on shared ideals, affects and solidarities.**