Conservative Counter-Movements? Overcoming Culturalising Interpretations of Right-Wing Mobilizations Against ‘Gender Ideology’

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Introduction

Since 2012, several European countries have seen the rise of conservative and, in part, fundamentalist social movements against the perceived threat of what they call ‘gender ideology’, ‘gender theory’ or ‘genderism’. Being opposed (depending on the context) to reproductive rights, LGBTQ-issues, Gender Mainstreaming, conventions or recommendations of supranational bodies (e.g. the Istanbul Convention for Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women; or World Health Organization recommendations of sexual education) as well as the public financing of Gender Studies, the advocates of these platforms tend to regard all political and non-governmental actors, administrative staff and scientific researchers who focus on these issues as a single homogeneous group and an organised lobby. This opposition is partly manifested in grassroots or religiously-affiliated movements and partly in the agenda of right-wing and populist parties. The simultaneity of the movements, the different triggers in countries that differ with respect to political landscape as well as gender and LGBTQ-policies indicates that, rather than dealing with isolated cases, we are witnessing a transnational phenomenon (Hark/Villa 2015; Kuhar/Paternotte 2017).

The transnational character is a defining feature of these movements. Therefore, it is necessary to look beyond local or national cases, even if it bears the danger of glossing over contextual differences. Another difficulty emerges in the analysis, as grassroots (e.g. parents), religious movements and political parties invested in these issues should be looked at simultaneously.

It is possible that there is no applicable macro-narrative that would explain everything with a one-size-fits-all model, and the danger of over-generalisation is high. How-

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ever, in light of the global reach of the phenomenon, more macro ambition is needed in constructing interpretations, especially since Latin-America and Africa are also affected (Kuhar/Paternotte 2017, 3). So far, very little research is available on the subject, nevertheless, it seems that the vehement debates on the European continent about ‘gender ideology’ are indirectly connected to the current contestations in the Anglo-Saxon world about political correctness, identity politics as well as a simplified notion of intersectionality and ‘gender’ understood as a felt sense of identity. To make the link between the different contexts, it seems helpful to discuss these movements in the context of the rise of right-wing populism and on the basis of considerations seeking to explain their demand side. I propose that ‘gender’ is not the final target for these movements, and they should not be understood primarily as mobilisations against equality. Rather, the emergence of these movements is a symptom of a larger crisis, and their ideologies are only the surface, where ‘gender’ is the symbolic glue (Grzebalska/Kováts/Pető 2017). Based on Chantal Mouffe’s (2005) critique of the established hegemony of consensus in liberal democracy, I discuss two consensuses that are characteristic of the so-called progressive actors, including feminist and LGBTQ-actors, namely the neoliberal consensus and the human rights consensus, and their contribution to the rise of the movements against ‘gender ideology’. Based on this I will argue that these movements provide responses to current structural crises in cultural terms. Interpretations limiting this phenomenon to a “fight between values” (e.g. framing them as counter-movements/backlashes against equality) function rather as an obstacle to understanding what is at stake by repudiating or obscuring this important structural realignment and reproducing false dichotomies.

The paper draws on debates in the Anglo-Saxon countries about identity politics and their reception in Western and East-Central Europe as well as speeches of the Budapest Family Summit in May 2017, which included the 11th World Congress of Families (WCF) and the 2nd One of Us Congress.1

**Illiberal and Populist Tendencies: Attacks on Democracy Through a Gender Lens**

Populist movements and parties are gaining in popularity all over Europe. In spite of the contextual and discursive differences, the East-West divide seems to lose relevance in this regard. This paper cannot undertake a critical analysis of the abundant scholarly literature on populism. Two aspects, however, need to be highlighted at the beginning, which define the paper’s take on this complicated issue. The paper follows the approach of those treating populism as a symptom and looking at systemic causes behind the populist tendencies, even leading in some countries to illiberal political shifts. For instance, in their paper about gendered aspects of the illiberal transformations in Hungary and Poland, Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Pető put forward the following argument: “(W)e argue that illiberalism can best be