

Opportunistic Synergy and the (Social) Affect of Anti-gender Politics

Graff, Agnieszka and Korolczuk, Elzbieta. 2022. *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. London and New York: Routledge. 212 pages.

IN THEIR NEW open access book *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (Routledge Studies in Gender, Sexuality and Politics, 2022), Agnieszka Graff and Elzbieta Korolczuk present the (current) culmination of at least a decade of work on the topic of anti-gender mobilisation. Both authors have been following and engaging with anti-gender thought and politics for years. The book itself chronicles events and developments from 2013 to 2020. However, materials and campaigns analysed date back to the mid-2000s, and thanks to the authors approaching the topic with such deep familiarity and knowledge, its comprehensiveness is impressive. One might say that Graff and Korolczuk have gone from having to argue that anti-gender movements are not fringe phenomena, to becoming key authorities capable of offering analyses of the movements' transformations and the expansion of transnational networks and impacts. By now, anti-gender politics are firmly at the centre of attention of gender and feminist scholars, as well as political scientists and those interested in social (counter)movements.

DOI: 10.34041/ln.v27.834
lambda nordica 3-4/2022

© The authors. Published by Föreningen Lambda Nordica under the CC BY-ND license.

While some of the chapters have been published elsewhere, there is value in seeing them in a larger, more comprehensive context. Placing anti-gender politics at the heart of right-wing populist mobilisation may not be the only way to understand mobilisations against gender, but the idea of “opportunistic synergy” is one with explanatory power, pointing out, as it does, the common discursive tropes and adjacent-but-not-necessarily-identical aims of the movements. In all of this, gender is key, and the way arguments are structured here offers a primer for those still having to argue for the relevance of gender studies or feminism as a perspective on contemporary politics. The authors argue that the way in which anti-gender positions have entered politics in Central and Eastern Europe via right-wing populist channels shows which kind of intellectual and strategic “synergies” are possible. Thus, their focus on Poland turns the book into more than merely a useful case study: “Poland should not be seen as an exceptional or provincial case but rather as a paradigmatic one, an important predictor for possible future trends in Western Europe” (p.109).

The book is divided into six chapters, with Chapter One providing some core definitions that lay the groundwork for the terms operationalised in the rest of the book. The authors explain how “gender” has come to function as a “symbolic glue” – a term memorably coined by Kovats and Poim (2015) – and how its remarkable malleability and flexibility across contexts helps it adapt to local concerns. The anti-gender movement’s reliance on naturalised, seemingly common-sense assumptions and amplification of “social affect” goes some way in explaining its success, with key themes such as “[the] image of the child in danger and the critique of cosmopolitan elites” (p.56) being used by anti-genderists globally. In studying the role of affect and emotions in anti-gender mobilisation, Graff and Korolczuk importantly focus not merely on negative affect present in processes of political mobilisation, but also on positive emotions such as pride and solidarity. A further important argument introduced early on in the book is that anti-gender mobilisation is in part a reaction, or resistance to, neoliberalism, and that feminism and individualism are frequently seen as going hand in hand in many Eastern European contexts.

Chapter Two discusses the intellectual sources of anti-genderism and maps out the transnational anti-gender movement. Crucially, Graff and Korolczuk insist that it cannot be reduced to a religious phenomenon. In fact, the “key to understanding the present phase of contemporary culture wars is the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape, in which Eastern Europe and Russia are the key battlegrounds in the struggle against gender and increasingly also influential actors in global struggles” (p.54). Chapter Three tells the story of Poland’s anti-gender campaigns and seeks to explain how they connect to both the populist right’s rise to power, and its subsequent attacks on reproductive rights and LGBT people – the resistance to which the authors participated in as activists as well as scholars.

In Chapter Four, anti-genderism’s ideology is deconstructed, especially in its relation to right-wing populism and the construction of the antagonism between people and elites therein. One prominent example of the instrumentalisation of such antagonisms is the use of anti-colonial rhetoric as part of a populist “meta discourse”, showing how the latter strategically picks up deeper frustrations and disappointments, which are then used to infuse politics. While the chapter details transnational alliances between right-wing populist and anti-gender actors enabled by their common worldview in which “social conservatism, misogyny and xenophobia come in various shades and proportions”, it offers up, if not exactly hope, then at least new points of critical leverage. Thus, where issues like social reproduction and the decline of the welfare state have been “hijacked” by anti-gender movements, feminists need to step in and *reappropriate* the rhetoric and agenda. Neoliberal feminism has proven a dead end in its neglect of these issues, while the global struggle for reproductive freedoms continues.

As Chapter Five on parental mobilisation demonstrates, parenthood is politicised and used as a means for forging new solidarities and expanding the realm of affect. When public discussions of policies appear devoid of emotion, talk of protecting the family, in particular children, from harm can be one avenue of reinjecting them with affect. The “traditional”, heteronormative family comes to represent a bastion against

neoliberalism, a sanctuary offering protection from governments and markets. It is here that relations of care are revalorised and redefined, so that the “crisis of care” becomes the crisis of the family. The chapter does not specifically focus on anti-genderists’ preoccupations with gender identity and trans* children (and the unholy alliance with “gender critical” feminists that these preoccupations potentially facilitate) but this may be due to overt transphobia being a more recent trend.

Overall, Graff and Korolczuk follow Chantal Mouffe in their characterisation of the “populist moment”, with hope and trepidation, regarding it as both a threat and an opportunity for democracy. Most of the book is dedicated to the former aspect, but it ends on a (carefully) hopeful note. The final chapter focuses on new feminist formations, using the example of the Black Protests in Poland but with the aim of speaking to a more transnational tendency, that encompasses movements like Ni Una Menos. The authors analyse how affect is again used to construct a people resisting a common enemy, but for the purpose of creating a new, *populist* feminism for all. And while the frame of populism may not be adopted by everyone, the authors’ treatment of anti-genderism as a coherent ideology, and their focus on affective processes, make it a key addition to the study of anti-gender movements. The book should be read by anyone who wants to gain a sense of anti-genderism’s genealogy, key terms, and development(s) in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond, as well as those seeking points of leverage in the fight against anti-gender politics.

**MARIA BROCK,
MALMÖ UNIVERSITY**

REFERENCES

Kováts, Eszter & Maari Pöim. 2015. *Gender as Symbolic Glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far-Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe*. Budapest: Foundation for European Progressive Studies.