

'Gender Ideology': Weak Concepts, Powerful Politics

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The articles collected in this volume are an important step in the ongoing effort of social scientists and gender studies scholars to understand the rise of the right wing 'war against gender'. Initially, the very concept of 'gender ideology' left many of us puzzled, having so little to do with our own perception of what our work was about. The right-wing offensive against 'gender' is no longer viewed as a polemic against gender studies, or indeed as a misunderstanding, but a new strategy on the right that transcends many divisions and contributes to the rise of illiberal populism. As we work in our various locations and then share and compare our findings concerning the strange career of 'gender ideology', it is crucial to keep in view two dimensions of the phenomenon: the theoretical (or theological) and the political (or strategic). On the one hand, 'gender ideology' is a concept – a signifier for what conservative Catholics construe as the evils of liberalism in the realm of human sexuality. 'Gender ideology' is thus a descendant of John Paul II's 'culture of death' and of the 'bad feminism', an idea present in Vatican's discourse in the post-war era and (see Garbagnoli in this volume). It is also a close companion of 'natural rights' and 'complementarity'. On the other hand, there is 'gender ideology' as a political slogan, part of transnational anti-gender mobilization, which may mean slightly different things in different contexts. Now, despite its intellectual weaknesses and internal contradictions as a concept, 'gender ideology' has been remarkably effective as a rallying cry. It is simply a great name for all that conservative Catholics despise, much better than 'liberalism' or 'culture of death'.

The strength of this volume consists in the fact that most authors strive to examine both dimensions – the theoretical and the political – in their analyses. The papers are most interesting when dwelling on the sometimes paradoxical links between them. Mary Anne Case's article is exemplary in this regard. It begins as a detailed exploration of the theological roots of 'complementarity' (a 'tale of three popes' as she calls it) but ends up showing that it is a recent invention with no biblical grounding. As with 'gender ideology', so with 'complementarity': it is a political development rather than a theological one, an instrumentalization of religion in a struggle for power. Historically, it was not an inevitable development, but part of the conservative turn that followed the Second Vatican Council. In a fascinating digression, Case spells out an alternative scenario that became briefly possible in the late 60s – an alliance between

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the Vatican and liberal feminism. Then again, things might have happened differently in the nineties, had Joseph Ratzinger not received a pamphlet titled 'Gender: the deconstruction of women' from Dale O'Leary, an American anti-feminist activist. We will never know if the Church's demonization of feminism and women's rights would have been less effective without the term 'gender' (perhaps another term would have done the job), but it is useful to realize the contingent aspect of the whole story, to see how the term has travelled and evolved, increasingly divorced from its origins in feminist theory. All this is not to say 'gender ideology' is a mistake – not in the least. It is a very effective bit of political rhetoric.

Krzysztof Charamsa bemoans the emergence of 'gender ideology', viewing it as a failure of intellect on the part of Catholic theologians. Faced with developments in psychology and gender studies, the Church responded with panic, which then turned into rigidity and shamefaced anti-intellectualism. He speaks less as a scholar and more as a disappointed former insider of the institution he critiques. Instead of re-assessing concepts such as 'natural law' in the light of gender studies and confronting new social reality, the Church cut off the very possibility of discussion, he complains, presenting this decision as an intellectual scandal and a moral defeat. This narrative may be true in reference to specific theologians – Charamsa tells us they simply failed to do their homework in gender studies. Indeed, I suspect most of them read Gabriele Kuby's caricature of gender studies instead. Yet, in my view, there is much more to 'gender ideology' than willful ignorance. It is, as other articles in this volume show, a remarkably flexible and effective political tool and must be examined as such. To put it bluntly, given Vatican's long-term goals, 'gender ideology' is a very smart invention.

This is brilliantly demonstrated in Sara Garbagnoli's article, my personal favorite in this volume. The author shows the doctrinal origins of the concept and examines its political career in two contexts (France and Italy). She approaches 'gender ideology' as 'a performative utterance that transforms the social reality it supposedly describes' (198), a remarkably effective strategy in a struggle for cultural hegemony. Let me add to this point that, at least in Poland, progressives have definitely lost this struggle: the word 'gender' is almost synonymous with 'perversion' in Polish media discourse. In January 2017, Kaja Godek, an anti-gender activist associated with a radical anti-choice organization, wrote a letter to public universities asking them to reveal lists of teachers who teach genderism, and the amounts they are paid. How the universities will react is not yet clear, but the request is phrased in an accusatory tone of someone searching for criminals. At the same time, the government is seriously considering Poland's withdrawal of its ratification of the Istanbul anti-violence convention on the grounds that it promotes 'gender ideology'.

As Garbagnoli explains, 'gender ideology' has worked to construct a single enemy out of groups and movements that, in reality, are quite varied. It manages to assemble both religious and non-religious actors, legitimizing itself as a discourse defending 'what is human', and that is difficult to respond to because of its remarkable flexibility. Thanks to the brilliant idea that 'gender' (and not 'feminism' or 'abortion' or 'homosexuality') are now the target, the Vatican has managed to reframe the debate, as 'the existence of an 'anti-gender' front produces a belief in the existence of a 'pro-gender' front' (193). This insight resonates fully with my own rather pessimistic view of the present struggle.

Progressives – and this includes progressive Catholics and Protestants whose role in gender struggles in Argentina is discussed by Pecheny et al. – are losing ground around the world. Engaging in debate with liberals was never part of the plan of the orthodox camp. The plan is to delegitimize our work and our way of thinking, to give us a nasty name that will stick and exclude us from public debate. The fact that the name happens to be borrowed from our own lexicon does not make matters any better.

This brings me to Eric Fassin's exploration of French anti-gender rhetoric. I found his essay both fascinating and excessively optimistic. Fassin is clearly intrigued and amused by the fact that anti-genderists, despite their supposedly strict adherence to essentialism, in fact partake in the highly theatrical exchanges at the heart of sexual democracy. Their signs and slogans and strategies are parodic rather than serious (as when the *Hommes* parody the feminist group *Femen*), they profess to be gay-friendly (but only anti-gay marriage), they even wear drag on occasion. In effect, he argues, 'this catholic rhetoric suffers from a major strategic flaw: the attack against gender studies makes the Vatican's position only one among others' (178). Fassin's analysis might even lead to the conclusion that anti-genderism is only strategically essentialistic, that its proponents are in fact fully aware of the constructed status of their own concept of gender. Indeed, I believe this is often so. Conservatives are often very intelligent and self-reflexive people, no more and no less so than progressives. The authors of playful slogans such as 'We want sex, not gender' or 'Don't you lay a finger on our gender stereotypes' (181–182), the activists who (somewhat incongruously) use the image of a snail to signal their disgust for gender ambivalence – these people are probably fully aware that their notion of what is 'natural' is, in fact, a construct. However, this does not make them participants of sexual democracy. They want their construct to win by excluding all other constructs. If we live in a liberal democracy, where free speech, free media and autonomy of universities can be taken for granted, then there is nothing to worry about. The debate continues. But do we really live in such a world? Unlike Fassin, I think illiberal populism is spreading fast and is aided rather than impeded by its use of parody and self-reflexive signs. These phenomena are no more cause for celebration for gender studies scholars than is the rise of Steve Bannon to the status Chief Strategist of White House. This is no sexual democracy; we are in the midst of a right-wing populist revolution.

Consequently, it is with a high dose of skepticism that I read Sarah Bracke's and David Paternotte's optimistic suggestion that

'gender ideology', in all its opposition to gender as a concept, nevertheless firmly relies on and reproduces the analytical work that gender as a category does, as it connects the dots between, among other things, sex, sexuality, reproduction, and family-formation. Precisely through accepting and making the link between these issues, the concept of gender is re-affirmed, even if its reproduction ostentatiously serves to reject the concept all together. 'Gender ideology', in other words, is caught in an inescapable bind: its rejection of gender remains premised upon, and ironically reaffirms, the conceptual linkages that gender as a category has established. (148)

The rise of anti-genderism as a victory of gender studies? It seems like a tempting view of the matter, but I am left unconvinced. As with Fassin's contribution,

my response is colored by lived experience of anti-genderism not as part of 'sexual democracy' but as part of the ideology of the ruling government. Indeed, anti-feminists today are appropriating many rhetorical tactics of the progressive left and the LGBT movements. But this is as much ground for optimism as the successful use of irony by the alt right movement in the US. The religious (as well as secular) populist right is successful today because it has learned to be 'hip': well dressed, witty, great at using modern media (including social media), well versed in well as rhetorical strategies and communication styles associated with post-modernism (parody, sampling, pastiche, irony, drag) and progressive social movements (positioning oneself as victim of 'discrimination' and rebel against the status quo). They use these tools well, but they use them with the aim of dismantling liberal democracy, and not of engaging in its many debates. Thus, the very same aspects of 'gender ideology' which appear as contradictions or intellectual weaknesses, are in fact enormously effective discursive manipulations.

Poland is a location where this is probably more evident than elsewhere. The 2012–2014 anti-gender campaign and the moral panic it provoked ushered in the right wing victory in the fall of 2015, some of anti-genderism's key players joining the government. Since then, the threat of 'gender ideology' has been largely replaced by that of refugees from Muslim countries (who are equated with Islamic terrorists). The crusade against gender was a prelude to authoritarianism and continues to be its ally. The threat supposedly represented by 'genderists' is invoked by right wing politicians as a justification for the ongoing dismantling of democratic institutions, changing school curricula, targeting scholars organizations. For those facing such repressions, it is a doubtful comfort that, as Eric Fassin suggests 'gender' has received increased visibility thanks to anti-genderism.

One of the most intriguing aspects of anti-genderism is the recurrent theme of gender as 'colonization' (Graff and Korolczuk 2017). Bracke and Paternotte suggest that the emergence of this theme should be viewed as part of the 'rise of a postcolonial Church', represented by cardinal Sarah and Pope Francis. The religious landscape of the Global South is of key importance here, especially the 'competitive religious market is characterized by an increased pressure on the African Catholic Church to position itself uncompromisingly when it comes to homosexuality, in response to Pentecostal and Charismatic denunciations of the Catholic Church as partaking in a global conspiracy promoting gay rights' (Bracke and Paternotte: 150). I found this analysis a useful complement to my own understanding of right wing uses of the anti-colonial frame. We need to consider, however, how the frame functions in various contexts and locations. When 'colonialism' is invoked by actors such as nationalists allied with the Catholic Church in Eastern Europe it is the European Union that functions as 'colonizer'. The category of indigenous culture (wherever it might be) as conservative and 'authentic' may be undefensible in theoretical terms, but it has tremendous mobilizing power because of its appeal to collective affects (pride and shame). Believers in many different contexts have been addressed by anti-gender discourse as special, exceptional, indeed 'the chosen' people destined to save the world from gender, to defend Christianity and human nature. As a number of scholars located in Eastern Europe have recently argued, the power of anti-gender rhetoric consists not in its internal consistency but in its role as 'symbolic glue' on the right, its status at the new language of populism:

For illiberal populist forces [...] the concept of 'gender ideology' has become a metaphor for the insecurity and unfairness produced by the current socioeconomic order. [...]. 'Gender ideology' has come to signify the failure of democratic representation, and opposition to this ideology has become a means of rejecting different facets of the current socioeconomic order (Grzebalska et al. 2017).

Elżbieta Korolczuk and I have argued that the anti-colonial frame is central to this political success, which has little to do with the actual history of colonialism:

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. (Graff and Korolczuk 2017)

To conclude, I found the contributions to this volume enormously interesting if sometimes too optimistic. It also left me with a number of unanswered questions. One issue that I expected would be explored is the relationship between anti-gender crusade and crisis resulting from the pedophile scandals. More than a temporal coincidence is at stake here, that much is clear, but it is not clear what the link might be. In Poland 'gender' (along with high divorce rates and pornography) was sometimes blamed for pedophilia. Was this an exception or part of a pattern? Another intriguing theme which was left largely unexplored in this volume is that of 'gender' as apocalypse and more broadly the dramatic aspects of anti-gender rhetoric. There is something delightfully demonic about 'gender ideology,' the way it gathers, like a magnet, the various fears, anxieties and obsessions of cultural conservatism: the threat to children, the danger of 'collapsing' differences between men and women, the prophetic end of civilization. It all adds up to a profoundly disturbing but also titillating vision. Having studied some of the more obsessive anti-gender texts produced in Poland (notably by Father Oko, mentioned by Charamsa in this volume), I hoped to learn more about the eschatological dimension of anti-genderism. What is the theology behind the 'demon' of gender? How serious are the visions of 'destruction of man'? Is the Catholic version of anti-genderism significantly different from the Protestant one? Do secular anti-genderists reject the apocalyptic strands of the Catholic attack on gender or simply ignore it? These questions are still waiting for scholars willing to engage them; anti-genderism may eventually turn out to be dangerous politically, but in the meantime it remains a fascinating terrain for study.

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