



# BACKLASH: NORMATIVE BIASES AND HEGEMONIC FIGHTS IN PROGRESSIVE ACADEMIA

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The recent parliamentary elections in Hungary on April 3, 2022, were combined with a government-initiated referendum on four questions related to education about and media representation to minors of sexual orientation and gender identity. The goals of the referendum were to divide the opposition; to mobilize voters by presenting the safety of children as being at stake; and to reproduce the usual culturalist us-versus-them divide in which the opponents are presented by the government, its media, and affiliated organizations as enemies of the nation, a discursive strategy that had been deployed by the Orbán regime for years, including in relation to [migration](#) and the person of [György/George Soros](#). This time, it was sexual and gender minorities who were demonized and scapegoated to political ends.

Progressives in Hungary and elsewhere have rightly criticized the polarizing rhetoric that underpins the illiberal right-wing government's stigmatizing discourse. The framework most commonly employed to interpret this phenomenon in Europe and beyond is that of cultural backlash: "resistance to progressive social change, regression on acquired rights or maintenance of a non-egalitarian status quo," as a 2019 European Parliament-adopted [resolution](#) defines the term. This approach is taken not only in the policy sphere, but also in academia. David Paternotte [summarizes](#) some of the recent scholarly analyses of the conceptual, empirical, and political flaws of the backlash approach, including that it "tend[s] to reinforce the fictional unity of feminism or LGBTI activism" and that it presents these right-wing forces as simply reactive and lacking their own agenda.

Based on my academic publications, in the present text I would like to concentrate on two points that seem crucial to me in terms of the pre-programmed blind spots of academics who use the concept of backlash to describe and critically engage with the right-wing opposition to many progressive claims, including those related to gender and sexuality: the normative bias and the West-centric progress bias. If Western academia wants to take seriously the self-imposed obligation to decolonize and provincialize itself, engaging with these challenges should be part of its self-reflection.

## The Normative Bias

George Soros, an American billionaire of Hungarian origin, has been very active for years in spreading the view that "sex work is work" in East-Central Europe, a region where typically poor and ethnically marginalized women are trafficked or are left, due to poverty, with no "choice" but to engage in prostitution in Western Europe. His Open Society Foundations have also been working to normalize surrogacy, even though the current plight of Ukrainian surrogate mothers should give pause to the proponents of the view that rich heterosexual and gay couples have a "human right to a child."



Just as the illiberal Hungarian government's demonization of Soros should not stop us from critically assessing his political agenda, nor should the Right's stigmatization of LGBT minorities or its instrumentalization of fractures among progressives stop us from critically assessing what is going on in so-called progressive movements. While we must be politically careful, we cannot and should not silence these debates nor conflate the dignity of sexual minorities with the agendas of broader movements.

But this is exactly what the backlash narrative is typically used for: to delegitimize any criticism on the progressive side by reference to conservative or far-right backlash. This was recently done even by Judith Butler in her article for *The Guardian* entitled [Why is the idea of 'gender' provoking backlash the world over?](#) The argument goes as follows: *we* cannot afford these debates now; as *they* are attacking *us*, we must stay together. Those who still insist on the necessity of debate or even take issue with some of the current progressive catalog are rapidly labelled right-wingers, bigots, -phobic, -exclusionary or just useful idiots of the Right.

### The Academic Reproduction of a Polarizing Discourse

But this argumentation produces the same sort of discursive homogenization (both for the *us* and the *them*) on the progressive side as that for which these same people (rightly) criticize the right wing. Besides that, I would venture that this seems to be part of a hegemonic struggle within the progressive side: strategically using the right-wing threat to silence certain voices, pushing every dissent out of the realm of legitimate concern. Sadly, this strategy carries the danger that the power structures will reproduce the old unequal outcomes (the power of males over females, rich over poor, West over East—as the defense of the Ukrainian surrogacy industry by parts of the Western Left proves).

One can, of course, be opposed to the political instrumentalization of the backlash concept while nevertheless believing in its analytical utility. After all, the right wing opposes certain progressive policies and goals. But calling this opposition a backlash produces flawed observations, for three reasons: it misinterprets or at least overgeneralizes the root causes of the strengthening of the right-wing opposition to these issues; it posits a binary understanding of the phenomenon that is empirically wrong; and this binary is normatively loaded: we are *good* and they are *bad*.

First, the idea of backlash locates oppression in medieval, sexist/homophobic, etc., popular *attitudes* and suggests that these govern policies. The Hungarian government's de-accreditation of gender studies MA programs in 2018, for instance, was interpreted by gender studies scholars as an intervention against a critical discipline that could debunk the patriarchy or homophobia of the regime. But the fight against gender studies cannot be reduced to “patriarchy/ heteronormativity fighting back.” This interpretation carries a very simplified image of politics, ignoring [the broader context](#) of the de-accreditation: questions of academic autonomy, the relationship between politics and science, government vs. opposition, [symbolic markers of East vs. West](#) and [EU vs nation states, and the building of political identities and hegemony](#). Moreover, the Right has explored and instrumentalized certain real—and [problematic](#)—developments in this discipline. Framing opposition as backlash makes it difficult to scrutinize the structural reasons behind this opposition, as such a framing starts from the assumption that these reasons can be boiled down to the clear, old, well-known reason of anti-egalitarian attitudes.

Second, framing the right-wing opposition to certain progressive causes as backlash puts the whole phenomenon into a dichotomic framing: while opposition to any political claims can come from various groups and ideologies—including liberals, Marxists, and feminists—framing it as backlash reduces this criticism to a dichotomy: progress vs. backlash, social justice vs. injustice, being for or against equality, being inclusive or



exclusionary, enlightened or bigoted. This simplification debilitates the discussion of very complex phenomena, with serious consequences. Not only are the “usual suspects”—different interpretation of human rights claims in cases of prostitution, surrogacy, and trans/queer issues—excluded from this dichotomy, but even more classical topics such as the crisis of care work, the standing of paid work, and the economic independence of women cannot be pressed into it, since they are assessed differently by liberal, queer, and socialist feminists, who have different social theories and social diagnoses.

Third, this dichotomization of the discourse is heavily normative. It is based on the premise that what “progressives” propose is morally and unquestionably right. Any critical scrutiny of or opposition to “our” claims must be based on anti-equality, hierarchical views and therefore amounts to capitulation to the enemy. For instance, political claims that aim to redefine men/women from adult human males/ females to “adult humans who *identify* as male/female” go beyond the anti-discrimination claims of trans-identifying people. This is a radical, [ontological claim](#) that has sparked fierce debate in the US and Western Europe, a debate that is slowly infiltrating Eastern Europe.

### Overreliance on Deconstructivist Theories and Toxic Practices

This focus on inclusion in/exclusion from the category of woman/man goes back to the deconstructivist view that any categorization or differentiation is an act of dominance and hierarchy. But it is not, it is just a cognitive distinction, a human cognitive function, without any built-in normative hierarchization or biological determinism. However (and these are the political stakes), if this differentiation is framed as exclusion in a normative sense, as hate, and sometimes even compared to fascism (as by Butler in the article mentioned above), then every instrument can legitimately be employed to stop it. Everyone who feels oppressed by this view can feel justified in using any available means—bullying, deplatforming, trying to get someone fired—because this is just self-defense and part of the fight against an unjust system. Framing the opposition to so-called progressive claims as a backlash against oppressive forces is morally comfortable: instead of reflecting on one’s own agenda and methods, one finds oneself on the right side of history, while anyone who disagrees is seen as being driven by evil, backward motivations.

I therefore think recurring to “cultural backlash” is neither analytically nor politically useful. Rather, it is part of the populist discursive politics of the so-called progressive side and contributes to polarization, or even represents the equivalent of the right wing’s us-versus-them game. This can be used consciously, to construct an “us” through compelling narratives (though I doubt that labelling potential supporters as backward or fascist would be compelling). Mostly, however, it is deployed either unconsciously (under the guise of being descriptive) or normatively “naturally” on the right side of history, concealing the discourse’s own embeddedness in global power structures. And this brings me to my second point.

### West-Centric Progress Bias

In narrowing the debate around human rights to cultural values, as the backlash narrative does, we lose sight of the broader economic and political processes in which they are embedded. If we consider global power relations, one can see that the antagonism fueled by the Right and sometimes also by progressives is false: there is no clear line of divide between progressives and conservatives, open- and closed-minded people, tolerant and intolerant people, populists and democrats. Nor is there even a spectrum of progress that would lead from sheer homophobia/ misogyny to mature attitudes of acknowledging equality.



Indeed, there is no consensus on the side of the so-called progressives: there are distinctions within the groups of feminists, gays and lesbians, trans and queer activists, policy officials, gender studies scholars, Green, Leftist, social-democratic, Liberal politicians, not to mention regional and class differences in assessing these questions. Nor does history have an ultimate goal along a linear progress, even though this idea of movement from past to future and from backward attitudes to progressive ones—a liberal progress that is sometimes halted by reactionary forces—is inherent in the backlash narrative. Instead, there is no clear direction of progress; who determines what is right and who is able to carry it out is a result of political fights embedded in various, including global, inequalities.

This can be summarized in four points. First, there is no one way of progress. Second, human rights shaming is a counterproductive foreign policy strategy. Third, the backlash narrative misses the fact that progress has been made unevenly for different classes of women and gays/lesbians. Fourth, donor- and EU-driven West-imitation in feminist and LGBT politics is not progress.

First, the idea of linear liberal progress is embedded in global inequalities, namely in core-(semi-)periphery dynamics. The claim is that “inferior” regions (like the Global South or Eastern Europe) should culturally catch up with the West. Dennis Altman and Jonathan Symons [articulate](#) the flaw of this approach in the case of gay rights with respect to North-South dynamics:

[W]e anticipate that lasting social progress can ultimately only emerge from within societies; outsiders might nurture progressive tendencies through engagement and dialogue, but we anticipate that coercion (economic or military) and moralizing will tend to be counterproductive...[W]e suspect that gay liberation will not follow a predetermined trajectory in which each country has a “Stonewall moment”, creates gay districts and eventually legalizes gay marriage. (p. 134)

Second, à propos moralizing, Jack Snyder speaks about human rights shaming and [argues](#) that this is counterproductive:

Shaming can easily be interpreted as a show of contempt, which risks triggering fears for the autonomy and security of the group. In these circumstances, established religious and elite networks can employ traditional normative counter-narratives to recruit a popular base for resistance. If this counter-mobilization becomes entrenched in mass social movements, popular ideology, and enduring institutions, the unintended consequences of shaming may leave human rights advocates farther from their goal. (p. 1.)

The Hungarian government’s anti-LGBT discourse indeed shows how this shaming by the West can be politically instrumentalized (Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes even [state](#) that this is the main driver behind right-wing populism in East-Central Europe).

Third, the backlash narrative is also West-centric in the sense that it treats the transformations, EU accession, and the ensuing policy changes—which are now being reversed by right-wing forces (especially in Poland and Hungary)—as unambiguously positive. This view does not take into account that these changes expanded the rights only of certain groups of women and gays/lesbians. Indeed, the democratic and neoliberal transformations and the EU accession brought many women in ECE not more freedom but more exploitation, while the illiberal PiS and Fidesz-KDNP are bringing them greater emancipation through the [\(partial\) recognition](#) of [care work](#).



Finally, in the case of East-Central Europe, [the import of Western-style feminist and LGBT activism](#) following the regime changes can be considered, with hindsight, partly as an elite effort to culturally catch up with the elites of West and partly as an effort to make the best of the reliance on EU and donor funds; the latter, as widely documented in research about social movements and NGOs in the region, provided not only the money, but also the agenda and the social theory.

The backlash narrative conceals all these facts.

Obviously, a place where gays and lesbians can live freely without fear of violence and stigmatization is a better place to be gay or lesbian than a place where this is not possible. A place where women are not exposed to male violence or, in the event that it happens, can count on the justice and social systems is better than a place where they are exposed and cannot expect institutional support. In that sense, there is indeed a clear direction of progress, and human rights (which are still not guaranteed in many countries) are better. However, not all feminist and LGBT claims can be universalized.

For instance, framing prostitution as sex work or surrogacy as a legitimate way of fulfilling one's (presumed) "right to a child" (and treating these practices as emancipatory claims of self-determination—"my body, my choice"—on the part of the women concerned) reinforces global and gender inequality. In these cases, a universalism is simultaneously applied and concealed: those women, gay individuals, and activists ("subaltern") can speak from the Global South and Eastern Europe and are heard by progressive activists who speak exactly these "truths."

We need serious discussions about where to draw the line between what we treat as universal truths, what we consider as tolerable but not universalizable contextualized practices, and what we see as part of a conflict-free "diversity". But what we should critically assess is the denial of universalism in one sense and its simultaneous defense in another sense. This is all the more true because a critique of universalism is an important tenet of current progressive politics.

### Positionalities and Backlash

Feminist, Black, and decolonial scholars have rightly pointed out that the social sciences are not outside of society, hence are also conditioned by the power relations in it, and have called out the biases of mainstream social science research. They have shown that a scholar's social positionality might influence what he or she is able to perceive, will treat as relevant, and will interpret what he or she finds. In the same vein, I believe that Eastern Europeans are better placed to notice and call out inequalities between East and West and the exploitation of the East in Europe, be it in the meat industry, elder care, academia or prostitution. This does not, however, mean that all Eastern Europeans would make the same diagnoses or are experts on these questions.

The important intervention of standpoint epistemology is sometimes turned [into its own anti-intellectualist parody](#), at times making scholars indistinguishable from the most radical political activists: *only* the marginalized can speak, and they are *per se* right. If they disagree among themselves, then the "right" individual is the one that defends the current activist catalog, while the other has internalized misogyny, homophobia, racism or transphobia. On this view, the researcher's positionality *alone* determines the merit of his or her argument; there is *zero* difference between academia and any other spheres of society in terms of knowledge production, and academia is *solely* a hegemonic struggle. I believe these worrying practices (trends?) deserve critical scrutiny



instead of the morally comfortable backlash narrative that *we* are always right and should be unified “on my own terms.”

In order to better understand the right-wing opposition to culturally progressive causes in Europe and not reproduce the same populist logics in the field of social sciences as the right wing is pursuing in politics, we need a framework that cuts through analytically false and politically biased dichotomies like those produced by the backlash narrative, as well as a framework that is able to take into account the geopolitical and economic embeddedness of cultural claims.