



CULTURE WARS EN MINIATURE: HOW AUSTRIAN FAR-RIGHT AND CHRISTIAN CONSERVATIVE FORCES USE GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY IN THEIR STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONY

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Culture Wars Papers, no. 30, November 2022

Questions of gender, sex, and sexuality have become major points of contention in the culture wars raging internationally. Sexual and reproductive rights, access to abortion, equality for same-sex couples, anti-discrimination regulations, health care for trans youth, comprehensive sex education—the list of highly moralized issues that mark the line between left-wing and liberal political forces, on the one hand, and right-wing conservatism, on the other hand, in these policy fields continues to grow rapidly. However, these lines get blurred when it comes to gender-sensitive language and alleged political correctness. Austria—even though sometimes referred to as an “island of the blessed”—is no exception, as the country is deeply rooted in Catholicism and has a long tradition of a rather strong right-wing party, the [Austrian Freedom Party](#) (FPÖ). In this contribution, we analyze how issues of gender and sexuality feature in right-wing political strategies in Austria and how they are connected to the broader hegemonic projects of the nativist populist far right as well as of Catholic conservative actors.

We start with some background information on Austrian politics and the slow liberalization of the country since the 1970s in order to situate the following analysis of anti-gender and anti-LGBTQIA+ positions.

Austrian Politics in a Nutshell

In discussing morally loaded politics in Austria, three main points are noteworthy:

- 1.) Austria is a small country of just 8 million inhabitants. The capital, Vienna, is the only big city, while much of the rest of the country is rural.
- 2.) There is a long tradition of Catholic Church influence on politics and society, even if the credibility and membership of the Catholic Church have declined tremendously in recent decades, due not least to blatant cases of sexual abuse.
- 3.) The two competing fascisms of the 1930s and 1940s—Catholic Austrofascism and anti-clerical National Socialism—until recently shaped the right wing of the political spectrum.

Until the 1990s, the Austrian political system was dominated by two major parties: the [Austrian Social Democratic Party](#) (SPÖ) and the [Christian-conservative People’s Party](#) (ÖVP). The ÖVP, with historical ties to political Catholicism and Austro-Fascism, spans a relatively broad political spectrum, including liberal as well

as very conservative (Catholic) elements. Under chairman Sebastian Kurz from 2017 to 2021, the party became increasingly right-wing populist. The SPÖ, the [Green Party](#), and some small liberal parties oppose these ideas with a more liberal discourse.

The consensus-oriented system has been challenged by the right-wing FPÖ, which has since the 1980s developed from a small, German-nationalist right-wing extremist party into a major right-wing populist force ([Heinisch 2012](#), [Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013](#), [Bailer and Neugebauer 1998](#)). The FPÖ has repeatedly formed coalition governments with the ÖVP at the national level. The party has connections to traditional right-wing extremist groups as well as to “New Right” organizations, most prominently the “identitarian movement” ([Mlejnková 2019](#), [Murdoch and Mulhall 2019](#)). Additionally, the protests against Covid measures emboldened a new type of right-wing movement often prone to conspiracy theories and in which right-wing extremist activists with different backgrounds took leading roles.

The issues of gender equality, sexuality, and reproductive rights were put on the agenda by the Austrian women’s movement in the 1970s. This resulted in the liberalization of abortion legislation, over the fierce opposition of the ÖVP and the Catholic Church, in 1975 ([Köpl 2001](#), [Mesner 2021](#)). Since then, legislation mandating equal treatment of women and men, as well as gender-mainstreaming provisions, have been developed—yet the gender wage gap remains far [above the EU average](#) (18.9% in 2020 compared to 13.0%) and the welfare state still builds on a conservative family ideal. With regard to LGBTQIA+ policies, a partial decriminalization of homosexuality was initiated in 1971, followed by the abolition of discriminatory regulations. In 2010, civil unions were established for same-sex couples and in 2017 the Constitutional Court ruled that the right to marriage could no longer be withheld from them. Same-sex couples had also been granted the right to adopt children the year before. In 2010 a court [ruling](#) ended the requirement of gender reassignment surgery as a prerequisite to changing one’s legal gender status, and in 2018 the Constitutional Court mandated that „intersex people, who are biologically neither clearly ‘male’ nor ‘female’, have the right to be registered according to their sex characteristics in the civil register or in official documents”, which today offers the possibilities “inter”, “divers”, “open” or “no entry” besides “male” and “female”.¹

Contesting Women’s and Gender Rights: Starting a Culture War

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, all of these processes of liberalization and emancipation have been accompanied by conservative protests, indicating struggles over culture. Symbolic efforts to include female and/or gender-neutral language in the traditionally male-dominated German language have produced frantic debates since the 1990s that in some ways foreshadowed today’s anti-gender discourses. While the FPÖ’s main issue since the late 1980s has been anti-migration mobilization, the party has also used its time in government to dismantle the institutional gains of the women’s movement, as, for instance, with the dissolution of the women’s ministry in 2000. The party’s anti-feminist efforts [shifted](#) toward anti-gender activities in 2008, when FPÖ representative Barbara Rosenkranz published the first [anti-gender mainstreaming book](#) in Austria. For the first time, anti-gender mobilization received public and media attention.

Since 2012, so-called “[marches for the family](#),” drawing a few hundred participants, have been held annually by right-wing Catholic, conservative, and far-right groups in opposition to Vienna Pride. In 2019 a group

¹ Until now only intersex people (but not trans or non-binary people) have the right to chose a label other than “male” or “female”. See also “Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe and Central Asia 2022,” Rainbow Europe, <https://rainbow-europe.org/sites/default/files/annual-report/Annual-Review-Full-2022.pdf>; “LGBT+ Rights in Austria,” Expatica, last accessed October 25, 2022, <https://www.expatica.com/at/living/gov-law-admin/austria-lgbt-78729/>.

supported by evangelicals, representatives of the Catholic Church, and the FPÖ unsuccessfully initiated a motion in the Austrian parliament under the hashtag [#fairändern](#) to tighten the Austrian abortion law.

The FPÖ, as well as a short-lived right-wing party, Team Stronach, joined the anti-gender movement, initially initiated by the Vatican after the UN conferences in Cairo and Beijing ([Paternotte 2015](#), [Bracke and Paternotte 2016](#)). Today, this discursive coalition fights what it calls “genderism,” “gender ideology,” “gender delusion,” and even “gender fascism.” All these terms refer to the impending abolition or destruction of the sex-gender-desire nexus as a natural and self-evident property of human beings. In this sense, these notions are specific (mis)representations of (de)constructivist feminist and queer theories that aim to delegitimize all kinds of progressive policies in the fields of gender and sexuality.²

In an earlier [analysis](#), we showed that within Austrian right-wing political discourse, “gender ideology” functions as an [empty signifier](#). It denominates neither specific social phenomena or policies nor an ideological standpoint, but a vague (albeit emotionally loaded) rejection of the development of family policies, gender equality, gender studies, sexuality policies, and sex education. “Gender ideology” is a crucial notion for establishing a [“chain of equivalences”](#) that links anti-abortion and men’s-rights activism to anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-feminist agendas, as well as to Catholic conservative, right-wing, and neo-liberal stances on social policies in general. “Gender ideology” provides a focal point to create these chains as well as antagonisms, which are embedded in threat scenarios.

To create hegemony, the signifiers that construct the antagonism between a popular “we” and the “other” tend to become [“empty signifiers,”](#) i.e., signs without connection to a specific particularistic demand, which then shift easily from one issue to the next. Such empty signifiers have the potential to [“bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly heterogenous reality,”](#) thereby allowing (right-wing) populist actors to seemingly embody this heterogeneity and establish hegemony. Overall, “gender ideology” has been able to create an anti-liberal and anti-modern chain of equivalences that denotes a position in a war against modernity and equality rather than signifying specific grievances.

Shifting Signifiers: From “Gender” to “Globohomo”

In recent years, however, this coalition of Christian-conservative and far-right actors has shifted the focus of its mobilization within the anti-gender paradigm to queer and trans issues. [The European Song Contest](#), held in Vienna in 2015, led to far-right [protests](#) against Vienna’s self-marketing as a liberal LGBTQIA+-friendly city. Homophobic arguments were also at the core of protests by so-called [“concerned parents”](#) against the introduction of sexual education guided by ideas of diversity in Austrian schools. Since 2021, “Identitarian” activists and the youth organization of the FPÖ have campaigned against Pride Month and for a [“Patriot Month”](#) (FPÖ youth organization Tyrol) or a [“White Boy Summer”](#) (*identitarian*) instead. In June 2022 a reading of queer children’s books by drag queen Candy Licious in a public library in Vienna led far-right activists from the “Identitarians” to erect a makeshift wall in front of the entrance in an attempt to scandalize the event. In this context, the term “globohomo ideology,” [introduced](#) by a Vienna FPÖ representative, has replaced the older “gender ideology” in an effort to create a threatening image—both of the “global homogenization” of multiculturalism and of a global homosexual takeover.

² Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa, “‘Anti-Genderismus’—Warum dieses Buch?“ In *Anti-Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, ed. Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 7–13, 7.

The term “gender ideology,” which is most widespread in anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ propaganda, has always been characterized by flexibility and proved open to terms like “globohomo ideology.” This notion centers sexuality rather than gender, while still being applied to gender identities that do not fit the male-female dichotomy. Rather than signifying a change of subject, the shift to “globohomo” points to the strengthening of links between the anti-gender discourse—with its Catholic origins in the 1990s and early 2000s—and genuine far-right discourses that identify globalization and a loss of (national) identity as the main problems facing society. These issues are intrinsically linked to racism, antisemitism, and nationalism (as in the “[Great Replacement](#)” myth propounded by the French right-wing extremist Renaud Camus). This turn toward global conspiracy myths—i.e., the belief in an international queer conspiracy orchestrating political developments on a global scale—has been part of former “anti-gender” rhetoric, but its rising importance also seems to be linked to right-wing efforts to play a dominant role in movements against Covid measures, in which different conspiracy myths play a key role.

Threats and Moral Panic: Weapons in the Austrian Culture War

In right-wing populist chains of equivalence, constructions of enemies and threats may shift, but the discursive structure remains the same: the “anti-gender” discourse of a “globohomo” threat organizes a moral panic and antagonistic relations between “us”—the “normal” people, whose lives revolve around “natural” gender and sexual relations in which “common sense” rules out ambivalence—and “them”—the globo-homo-gender-trans lobby that actively seeks to destroy “our” way of life, “our” families, and “our” social order. Different anti-gender actors differ in their political perspectives, with, for example, Catholic conservatives perceiving the threat to an allegedly divine social order as the main problem and secular far-right groups fearing for the future of the ethnically pure nation (“*Volk*”), but shared constructions of threats pave over these differences. The most common and probably most effective of these constructions is the threatened (heterosexual and native) family. The image of “family” forms a focal point of “anti-gender” discourses, as it plays different roles for different actors. For the far right, it is central for the biological reproduction of the ethnically defined nation; for conservatives, it is the main arena for the transmission of social and religious values; and both use it as the antithesis to welfare and state intervention into the social realm. At the same time, the safeguarding of one’s family is an integral part of common sense, making the discursive “trick” of declaring anything related to gender equality or LGBTQIA+ rights a threat to the family both attractive and hard to counter. In the same vein, children are often declared victims of “gender ideology”: the mobilization of the common-sense image of the innocent child threatened by “early sexualization” at kindergartens and schools³ serves as an important tool for the demonization of the “other,” namely LGBTQIA+ people and feminists.

Besides far-right and (Christian) conservative ideologies, masculinist and men’s rights discourses form a further line of thought that feeds into the anti-gender discourse. Even though the defense of male superiority seems more clearly expressed in “old” anti-feminism, which constructed women’s emancipation as its main enemy, “gender” also features prominently today, as it is linked to an alleged “crisis of masculinity,” i.e., the loss of male identity and strength. Like the threatened family and child, the image of the emasculated man does different work for different actors, from being a threat *per se*, as it runs counter to far-right images of heroic masculinity; to exacerbating the threat to families, who miss out on a strong patriarch, and to children (especially boys), who grow up without a strong father figure. In the wake of these threat scenarios, calls for the restoration

³ Imke Schmincke, “Das Kind als Chiffre politischer Auseinandersetzungen am Beispiel neuer konservativer Protestbewegungen in Frankreich und Deutschland,” in *Anti-Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, ed. Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 93–108.

of male privilege—regarding family law and control over women—have been growing louder even outside the notoriously misogynistic online manosphere.

Conclusions

This short review of just the most common threat scenarios in “anti-gender” discourses and the way “gender” as an empty signifier interacts with the overdetermined notions of “family,” “child,” and “masculinity” explains why they are so successful at uniting actors across ideological differences in their war against liberalism, modernity, and equality. Today’s anti-gender discourse serves as common ground for different Christian as well as secular branches of the right-wing political spectrum in Austria.

“Gender ideology” as an empty signifier lends itself easily to right-wing populist discursive strategies, as it allows for the creation of chains of equivalence between the antagonisms of men and women; the (gender) elite and “normal” people; LGBTQIA+ people and families; the majority population and migrants. “Gender ideology” is able to re-articulate elements of diverse discourses into a common framework to which different actors can connect. This framework includes the narrative of an existential threat that renders their views and actions part of something bigger and highly important. “Gender,” the argument goes, not only legitimizes abortion, women’s quotas, and the right of gay and lesbian couples to family life, but challenges the survival of Austrian culture, society, nation, and state. The only solution, then, is for right-wing leadership to re-establish not only white male supremacy, but also the allegedly “natural” heterosexual gender binary.