

Culture Wars in Europe

Edited by
Eszter Kováts

Institute for
European, Russian,
and Eurasian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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Studies Program

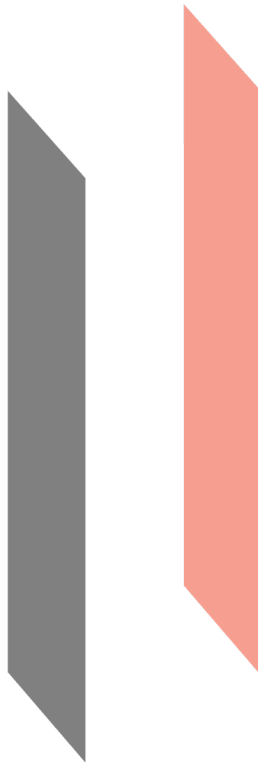
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Assistant editors

Marlene Laruelle

John Chrobak



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Illiberalism Studies Program
The Institute for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies
The George Washington University
1957 E Street NW Suite 412
Washington D.C. 20052
www.illiberalism.org
illibstudies@gwu.edu

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INTRODUCTION

by Eszter Kováts

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When it comes to the current culture wars, a term to describe political polarization along cultural-values lines, a lot of research has been dealing with various actors of what is called the far right, radical right, populist right, or illiberal right—how they fuel, exacerbate, or politically use questions of morality and causes that are often labelled cultural or relating to recognition. Much less has been done on the developments on the so-called progressive side of the spectrum, probably because social scientists tend to be themselves on this side, and prefer to problematize the developments of the Other.

Also, as with other loaded concepts like populism and illiberalism, the notion of culture wars is often used not only in analytical terms but also in political debates to delegitimize the opponent. While its semantic usage offers a symmetrical perspective (the “wars” have at least two sides), the term is often used only to depict the conservative counteroffensive against liberal values or the “progressivist” attack against a supposed societal value consensus. My starting point and guiding principle for inviting authors for this series, therefore, was that culture war is not something that the right-wing is doing and that we the enlightened progressives endure, but rather, that this is a dynamic that is sustained by all who participate in it, and that the progressive side can have (and indeed, often has) a stake in framing an issue as a battle between Good and Evil. This collection of articles proposes a more symmetrical approach, dealing with both the conservative/nationalist and the liberal/progressive side, while accepting that declaring something a culture war (see the chapter by Juros in the volume) and naming these sides is part of these conflicts (see the opening chapter by Slačálek). With this in mind, senior and junior scholars were invited as authors who hold exciting, sometimes provocative, but in any case, challenging views on the culture wars in Europe.

Thirty-six papers were published in the series “Culture Wars in Europe” between May 2022 and May 2023 on the webpage of the Illiberalism Studies Program of The George Washington University (illiberalism.org), which we are republishing now as an e-book compilation. Some of the papers are summaries of previously published pieces (often originally written in

languages other than English), but most of them are new contributions; some of them follow a more academic writing style, others are rather essays. What they all have in common is their discussion of current developments that can be subsumed under the label of “culture wars,” and where the roles of the culturally more liberal or progressive side, and of academia, are scrutinized too.

The series had the goal of initiating a dialog between the U.S. and Europe. The cultural and social science hegemony of the U.S. is still in place, guiding or rather misguiding intellectuals from the U.S. (and in Europe, intellectuals oriented towards the US) to what Václav Bělohradský (as quoted in the chapter by Slačálek) aptly calls “metropolitan provincialism.” In this context the papers explore the question of to what extent concepts and theories developed in and for the U.S. are applicable in Europe: the culture war in the first place, but also certain specific approaches—such as to what extent “critical whiteness” is helpful in understanding racism in Europe or inhibiting blind spots; current strands of queer theory to understanding gender relations in Europe; and so on. To put it differently, in the context of global inequalities—in economic terms, and not unrelated to them, in terms of knowledge production and determining what counts as cultural progress: how do concepts and causes that are intended to be emancipatory, fall into the trap of ignoring local contexts and follow a colonial or imperial logic, communicated through channels of power (political elites, institutions, funding, media, academia)? And on a related note, current political practices of the U.S. arrive in Europe, and are then pursued by activists, policymakers and donors: are these surely the way forward in all contexts? These questions must also be asked—and are asked in these papers (for instance, by Breiding, Suissa and Sullivan, and Nógrádi).

East and West

Besides this, one explicit goal of the series was to create a dialog between Eastern Europe and the West (that is, Western Europe and US). In the current notion of the ‘global’ (in terms of Global North vs. Global South), the former Second World, the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, are rarely given a place. Expertise in dealing with political, social, economic, and cultural developments in this region is often relegated to various area studies, and hence ghettoized. Also, concepts and theories of the West are sometimes applied, without contextualization and local relevance, to developments in the East. This series has attempted to be a contribution against such academic practices, and to read processes in East and West *together*. First, this is because including expertise on and standpoints from East-Central Europe is (unsurprisingly, yet often forgotten) crucial to better understanding the region. But second, it is guided by a conviction following [Comaroff and Comaroff](#), who say that

theory from the South can explain not only what is happening in the South, but also in the North. In our case, theories from the East can contribute to a better understanding of developments in the West. Therefore, half of the authors come from East-Central Europe, but also, through their papers, they are not only commenting on issues related to their respective region or countries but speaking about the developments *in* the West, and *to* the universal too.

Structure of the Book

The first set of papers discusses the conceptualization of culture wars both in comparison between the U.S. and Europe, and between Eastern Europe and the West (see Hennig, Hesová). They deal with the potential and limits that this concept has to offer; to what extent culture wars are fueled by the Right, and to what extent the so-called progressive or liberal side needs to be considered too; and what the pitfalls of the dichotomous understandings currently in circulation are (see Biskamp).

The second set of papers discusses the role of progressive academia in the current culture wars: in terms of concepts and theories, but also in terms of practices carried out by scholars and academic institutions. Indeed, Antonio Gramsci's ideas of hegemony and Michel Foucault's concepts of the relationship between knowledge and power often lead to understanding academic work as expanding minority rights by other means. Academic work often becomes overloaded by value expectations, which posits posing critical questions as one of the key aspects of scholarship, and the quality of scholarship is assessed based upon its contribution to causes that are currently treated as emancipatory. This approach is problematized by several papers (see Speck and Villa; Suissa and Sullivan).

The third, fourth, and fifth sets of papers discuss three fields that are currently very controversially discussed—feminism/gender/LGBT, reproductive rights, and race—and in which not only the discursive practice of the Right can and should be critically assessed, but—as most of our authors argue—the social-justice-committed actors (in academia and in social movements) also exhibit symptomatic omissions, double standards, and possibly problematic practices, be it the status accorded to personal experience in feminist theory (see Budgeon), the current progressive consensus in the West weaponized against dissenters (see Grzyb and Breiding), the dubious role of business in LGBT struggles (see Valkovičová), the changes in pro-choice rhetoric that merit critical scrutiny (see Balogh), the blind spots, partial resignation, and pessimism of anti-racism in Europe (see Perinelli; Peterson, and Ulceluse and Bender). Plenty of issues are addressed in the papers that shed light on these developments beyond a mere analysis of right-wing opposition.

The sixth set of papers discusses some further hot topics of recent years: Covid-19, climate change, and bioethical questions like euthanasia and surrogacy. These papers address some of the issues that are controversially debated *within* the progressive side.

And finally, the seventh set of papers gives insight into the developments of one particular country, in which a self-declared illiberal government has been in power since 2010. In Hungary, the government and its media and think tanks deliberately fuel the culture war for short-term and long-term political ends (electoral success and a new hegemony), and where this circumstance is often exacerbated by other pressures coming from the West. Through their reflection on current battlefields these case studies point beyond themselves and give some hints to help us grasp developments beyond Hungary: theory from the East.

A Commitment to Pluralism

These 36 pieces do not give an exhaustive account, either geographically or of all positions that can be found relating to the discussed topics, nor a complete list of all such topics themselves. For instance, the fiercely debated “sexwork/prostitution” controversy, or the critical race theory debates, or those on Russia’s war on Ukraine are only barely touched upon. Also, discussions about wokeness and cancel culture will be with us for years to come, and likely not in a left-right or progressive-conservative dichotomy. Nevertheless, this compilation represents a commitment to pluralism.

While this democratic and academic value is under fire both by the right wing and the left wing (including in academia and by activist-scholars), with this book we aim to set an example and we hope it proves that this is possible, has merits, and is necessary. For the series, I invited authors from various disciplines, methodological paradigms, and ideological convictions, including in their understanding of the relationship between academia and politics. The papers speak to each other, either explicitly engaging with one another’s arguments, or implicitly. Some of the authors strongly disagree with each other: what one considers a huge problem is presented as the way forward by the other, and vice versa. I understand pluralism not in the rightly criticized sense of the relativist approach of “anything goes” (as problematized by Budgeon and Schubert, too), but rather as a conviction, that some of our most pressing current debates need to be spelled out and discussed, even fiercely, even if a consensus is neither desirable nor possible. This approach is led by the conviction that shutting down certain positions in an authoritarian manner is not helpful for the cause. This is not only because we academics positioned rather on the liberal/progressive/

leftist side do often disagree on the “cause,” but also because such practices might inadvertently fuel the Right.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Marlène Laruelle for her trust to give me this platform and full freedom to design the series and the list of topics to cover and authors to invite, while at the same time carefully following the development of the papers and giving her insights to improve them. I thank John Chrobak too, who assisted us skillfully and helped immensely to making this project materialize.

Finally, I thank the authors who felt the commitment and found time for contributing to the series: in demanding jobs and/or precarious working arrangements; in constant overwork to meet the teaching, publishing, and administrative requirements of neoliberal academia or other job markets; and/or in performing in second jobs to make ends meet; in engaging in trade unions and other political work; among care responsibilities, chronic illnesses, mental health issues, impostor syndrome; and many more issues about which we talk too little in academia, where we only see the end results, like the published texts, and now this book, but we do not see and value enough what it takes, and how many thoughts are not formulated and how many papers are (here: were) abandoned because of the above circumstances and commitments. It is by far not self-evident that this series and finally this book could be born, and I am infinitely grateful that it has been.

I.

**HOW TO CONCEPTUALIZE
CULTURAL POLARIZATION
AND CULTURE WARS**

CULTURE WARS AS A DICTATORSHIP OF FORM

by Ondřej Slačálek

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Culture wars are often understood simply as the agenda of conservative forces. Much more frequently, however, they are conflicts with two sides. These two sides have differing compositions, agendas, and goals, and each considers itself to be a long way from the other. But the form of culture wars makes the sides closer than they would like to think.

Culture wars have a strange, shadowy existence. To write about them and label this or that conflict a “culture war” means somehow to participate. This is even more the case if one accepts the “sides” of these conflicts and their supposed permanent existence, or if one accepts their labels, the most common being “conservatives” and “liberals.” There is a strong degree of fluidity, however: the actors and their self-definition change. From an insider point of view, there are vast differences on both “sides,” if we even accept the existence of “sides.” From an external point of view, and even more from the point of view of the opposite side, the differences are not very important; the other side is often united in its hostility.

In this essay, I will try to characterize the form of culture wars by comparing it with the concept of moral panic. While in the case of moral panic there is a united and powerful society hunting minority “folk devils,” in the case of culture wars, society is split into two camps that struggle in more or less symmetrical conflict and to some extent mirror each other. In the next section, I will present three cases of such content mirroring: in images of decline, in revolutionary spirit (denied but present), and in the accentuation of identity shaped by the imaginary of the market. The final section will try to situate contemporary culture wars in space (semi-globalized U.S. metropolitan provincialism) and time (the era of individualism).

Symmetrically Produced Moral Panics

From the end of the 1960s, moral panic was an important concept of critical social analysis. The image of a population, led by its leaders and by “[moral entrepreneurs](#),” attacking an unpopular minority that the population considered to be a threat to basic moral values—and sometimes even to the existence of society—captured the Western imagination. The role of the

“folk devil” identified and persecuted in moral panics was played by youth subcultures, racial or gender minorities, and various other groups.

From the early 1990s, the image of “moral panic” began to be questioned. According to [critics like Sarah Thornton and Angela McRobbie](#), folk devils “can and do fight back;” they may also find powerful liberal allies and protectors. But even after this criticism, the image of moral panics remained powerful, seeming to provide an adequate depiction of various societal anxieties present in the public debate. We are still preoccupied by many images of “folk devils,” and society struggles with the temptation to unite in their persecution in order to restore its moral purity—or at least security. I think we can use this image as a point of departure to capture the most important aspects of culture wars as a form.

Standard depictions of moral panics, ranging from the works of [Stanley Cohen](#) to those of [Erich Goode and Nachman Ben Yehuda](#), highlight six basic traits of moral panics: attention, disproportionality, enmity, consensus, volatility, and exceptional measures.

Attention means united societal focus: strong media coverage supported by societal demand for even detailed aspects of the moral panic. Attention thus becomes self-sustaining, with moral panics reproducing themselves in a “spiral of amplification.” *Disproportionality* is connected with attention and is the most problematic part of moral panics, since it is very hard to say what proportion of information is adequate. To summarize, however, moral panics become newsworthy in themselves and give a prominent media presence to news that would not be interesting without them. *Enmity* is based on the idea that the object of the moral panic constitutes a danger—even an existential danger—to the moral order of the society. The attributes that explain the immorality and the position of existential threat become the key characteristic of the “composite image” of the enemy (Cohen), and the “folk devil” is stereotypically evoked with the use of a few characteristics that play a symbolic and explanatory role.

Consensus describes the relatively strong acceptance of a definition of a situation produced by a moral panic. Of course, developed modern liberal societies are never fully unified in their opinions, but at moments of moral panic even non-conformist actors often accept to some extent the definition of the situation and must either work within its limits or be constantly on the defensive ([Stuart Hall et al.](#) have shown this with regard to the position of the British left during moral panics related to ethnically coded violent crime). *Volatility* is derived from the fact that no society can live permanently in such a state of moral mobilization and anxiety. Moral panics become episodes that necessarily lose society’s attention eventually.

Sometimes, *exceptional measures* are used—or at least called for—to end the moral panic. Moral panics either lead to social change or they vanish.

What are the differences between culture wars and moral panics? One is obvious: the element of *consensus* that is present in moral panics is absent in culture wars. If culture wars are wars in any sense of the word, then it is, above all, because they have [two opposite sides](#). These two sides may call the other side “hegemonic” and consider themselves “marginal” or “marginalized”—but this, too, is part of the conflict rhetoric. After all, the deep divisions in society make hegemony extremely hard to attain. There are places of power, yes, but without the deep depoliticized consent presupposed by the term “hegemony.” The prevalence of culture wars thus looks like confirmation of Scott Lash’s thesis about “[power after hegemony](#).” An individual or group may attain power as “fact” but without the acceptance of their opponents. Some groups may successfully promote their definition of a situation, but even they typically face constant criticism, attacks, and attempts to dispute their claims and “facts.”

Instead of unity, we have a more or less symmetrical conflict between two sides. In this context, the element of *disproportionality* loses all purchase: even highly obscure topics (which regularly become the subject of culture wars) are made relevant by the simple fact of becoming the object of conflict—and thus a “symptom” of deeper societal divisions.

With regard to *volatility* and *attention*, the situation has definitively changed. Episodes are volatile, and changes in the media landscape, in particular, have changed the nature of attention: often, an intense culture war is present only in segmented publics and depends on a particular political intervention to ensure that the cultural conflict receives the attention of the mass media and a sizable part of society. The segmented nature of contemporary culture wars notwithstanding, they are not isolated episodes. They communicate between themselves and constitute chains of references and symbols. The topics change, but the sides are mostly overlapping or the same, and together they comprise one constant culture war with many episodes of different intensity.

Enemies are evoked in stereotypical ways, with Cohenian composite images containing a few stereotypical characteristics. Given that culture wars are much more symmetrical than moral panics, contemporary “folk devils” are not on the margins of society. They are relatively symmetrical competitors in a struggle for power and influence in society, in a conflict over rules and over the infusing of the imaginary mainstream (which is increasingly becoming lost) with the values of the particular side. Actors who are seen as being both a moral and an existential threat to society (not necessarily

for *doing* something, but simply for *being* “conservative bigots,” “racists” and “fascists” or “liberal commies,” “cultural Marxists” and “crazy feminists”) are evoked stereotypically using a few attributes, in a way that perfectly fits Cohen’s idea of a “composite image.” This level of enmity is reserved for somebody who was for a long time tolerated, for sides who share the space of a nation-state, civil society, and cultural infrastructure. Given this, *exceptional measures* are typically not available (so the awaited catharsis and resolution cannot come), but at the same time they look like the only adequate reaction. The spiral of amplification thus seems endless.

As such, contemporary Western societies live in a state of constant moral panics. These are relatively symmetrical and intense. With the transformation of the media landscape from the hegemony of huge mainstream producers dominating millions of “passive consumers” to “social media” featuring millions of co-producers, the volatility and intensity of these moral panics has reached a new level. The unclear position of the mainstream and the personalized nature of social media mean that almost anybody (from ordinary participants in public debates to state presidents) can consider themselves a persecuted minority, under pressure from the exclusive moral panic and “folk devil” hunting of the opposite side. This has been described by [Mark Fisher](#) in the case of the left, but it has become a common condition. At the same time, the informational space offers an almost infinite reservoir of cases of others’ “madness.” In such a context, coexistence can easily be conceived of as unbearable, yet there is no conceivable way out.

Mirroring or Parallels? Decline, Revolution, Identity

The opposing sides of culture wars have many substantial differences, but the shared form of the culture war brings them closer. To some extent, the form even inscribes itself into the contents. Both sides of culture wars place heavy emphasis on a vision of decline, and for both sides identity is the key topic. Can we find here imitative dynamics between enemies? The stimuli of war were depicted by [Carl von Clausewitz](#): “So long as I have not overthrown my opponent I am bound to fear he may overthrow me. Thus I am not in control: he dictates to me as much as I dictate to him.” We cannot provide evidence of mutual influence, but there is definitely similarity. We may identify it in three key elements of the discourse of both sides: the idea of decline (of the vitality of civilization, in the case of “conservatives,” or of civilizational standards, in the case of “liberals”), self-denied revolutionary spirit (against the establishment and its institutions, in the case of “conservatives,” and for the basic transformation of important societal norms, in the case of “liberals”), and a market-shaped concept of identity.

The focus on both decline and identity is, of course, characteristic of the “right-wing,” “national conservative” side of the culture wars. The over-used images of the “decline and fall” of ancient Rome are telling, especially in their focus on “moral decadence” and their omission of the fact that the Rome was an empire, unjust and tyrannical toward its subaltern parts. It is relatively simple to identify the elements of the declinist narrative on the conservative side: it is an image of the “good old normal world” of an understandable order and meanings destroyed by the liberal monster machine of new rights, contexts, and concerns. Deeper in this vision of decline is nostalgia for the world of industrial modernity, which may be retrospectively evoked as a space of order, clear relationships, and hierarchies (even if, during its golden age, this world was itself seen by conservative authors as the destruction of the earlier and supposedly idyllic world of rural stability, hierarchy, and order).

These conservatives call for a “return” to the “normal world”—but in fact, they do not have anywhere to return to. As Polish philosopher [Jan Sowa](#) has said in the context of the Polish PiS (but he could have been talking about Orbán, Trump, Johnson, and others), they are not conservatives, because they do not conserve established institutions. Indeed, they mobilize against them and try to destroy them. Whether they accept it or not, they are revolutionaries.

The opposite side of the conflict, often labelled “progressivist,” looks as if it is not declinist. But its goals and activity have a revolutionary nature that is often denied or misunderstood by proponents. While they (as a feminist, I should say “we”) relatively successfully promote revolutionary change in key institutions of Western society (family) and destabilize key and intimately experienced human roles (gender), they simultaneously pretend that this represents nothing more than an application of basic liberal principles (like equality), which cannot have any legitimate opponents. This revolution pretends not to be a revolution; it is a self-denying revolution. This is one of the reasons why progressives not only do not accept their opponents, but also do not understand them.

In spite of its progressivist nature, the liberal camp has its own vision of decline. Its most influential form is rhetoric about a “post-truth” or “post-factual” society. The basic element of the rhetoric is declinist: a world that does not accept “facts” as “truth” has lost an important civilizational standard that ruled in the recent past. This mutual interchangeability between “truth” and “fact” not only reduces the universalist and pluralist possibilities of the term “truth” (as something that is present in various ways in the life of any individual and can be expressed in various ways, including works of art or popular proverbs) to simple primitive empiricism.

It also makes sure that it is connected with the privileged position of the educated classes, able to know or produce facts.

An obsession with identity is, on the “conservative” side, clearly connected with the image of decline. Be it Trump promising to make the U.S. great *again*, Johnson promising the rebirth of Albion, or Orbán promising to save Hungarian ethnicity from the EU melting pot, conservatives claim fall and promise recovery. The image of fall is connected with a clear image of market competition among nations. In this imaginary, competition between nations is taken for granted and considered necessary and legitimate. Identity is mostly derived from a memory of an unchallenged privileged position in the global hierarchy—and from contemporary anxieties at the loss of this privilege.

The question of identity is also present on the opposite side, where the identity of groups is largely understood in terms of oppression. It is this oppression that legitimizes group identity: no oppression, no (truly valuable) identity. This causes some obvious problems, but there is also a more surprising issue: the market-influenced imagination is relatively clearly visible, especially in the concept of “cultural appropriation.” While the motives for this rhetoric are mostly understandable, and the power imbalances that it shows are real, the rhetoric is based on a presupposition that culture can and should be understood as exclusive property (in this case, of some particular groups). The paradoxical left-wing embrace of the absolutization of proprietary entitlements is based on disputable anthropology (as is mostly true of most of the market imaginary). It is hard to imagine a world of autochthonous cultures that do not influence one other—and could thus “belong” to somebody and be defended from being “appropriated.” The imagination of such a world mirrors the conservative imagination of strong national states: it is an imagination of clear borders that can restore our control exactly at the moment when we are confronted with a strong feeling of complete loss of control over the circumstances of our lives.

Individualized Revolt Against an Individualized World

Discourses about decline and identity are semi-global. They permeate the whole Western world with a day-to-day intensity and with a simultaneity in agenda and terms that is probably unprecedented. Due to the dominance of English as a lingua franca and the Anglo-American cultural and media infrastructure, the dominant symbols and references are mostly American. Even for Central European conservatives, the U.S. “neo-Marxist” campuses are one of the most important sources of Western decline. Meanwhile, for Central European feminist or anti-racist movements, U.S. definitions of problems and proposed solutions are of such key importance

that they often transfer them to their local debates not only without contextualization, but even without translation.

The Czech-Italian philosopher [Václav Bělohradský](#) spoke of two kinds of provincialism. The provincialism of the provinces is clearly visible, and so it is easy to see and criticize it. The provincialism of metropolises, however, is often hidden; the metropolitan self-centered focus on parochial fashions can easily be obscured by the wealth and power of metropolises. Thus, he believes, “metropolitan provincialism” is much more dangerous than the provincialism of provinces.

The age of semi-globalized culture wars is an age of semi-globalized U.S. metropolitan provincialism. It is semi-globalized because its global reach is mostly limited to the West. It is metropolitan provincialism because it poses local U.S. standards as a paradigm, a source of metrics and rhetoric for the whole world. U.S.-centric public culture, however, does not have adequate means of accepting inputs from other parts of the West, especially from the smaller national cultures of southern and eastern (but also northern) Europe.

The semiglobal circulation of U.S. “metropolitan provincialism” as a product evokes images of conflict between local polity and global usurpation. Polish feminist scholars and activists [Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk](#) have published a brilliant analysis of how this game works on the conservative side: feminism (“gender ideology”) is always presented as global, while conservative criticism thereof is always understood as local and grassroots resistance. Graff and Korolczuk show very vividly the manipulative nature of this discourse: for one thing, it overlooks the transnational nature of anti-feminist lobbies (be they pro-life moments, networks like Agenda Europe, or, most importantly, the majority of powerholders in the Catholic Church). It also denies the existence of locally rooted and grassroots feminist activism.

But this strange game of delegitimizing opposing views by attributing them to “alien” and “foreign” forces is far from confined to the conservative side. We can find a mirror image of it in the framing of conservative opposition (and especially its racist and anti-feminist moments) as a product of “Russian propaganda” or even “Russian agents,” the weapons and fighters of a “Russian hybrid war.” Part of the political generation termed by Czech political theorist [Pavel Barša](#) “89ers” uses this explanation not only to make these ideas nothing but the artificial result of foreign interference, but also to renew the relevance of the Cold War imaginary. Yet this image is not limited to this generation. Polish feminist writer [Klementyna Suchanow depicts](#) global anti-feminist networks funded by the

Kremlin. This image definitely captures some important aspects of reality, but it obscures the real fear: what if the anti-liberal, racist and sexist reaction is *not* mainly a product of foreign propaganda, but instead has a strong “authentic,” grassroots, and homegrown element, reflecting domestic troubles and contradictions?

This shared suspicion of alien forces intervening in our lives in a decisive way reflects a crisis of power in contemporary Western societies. The bankruptcy of state socialism and horrible stories of the misuse of state power for mass terror have re-actualized for the end of the twentieth century the classical topic of liberalism: the defense of the individual against misuse of power. The rise of globalization, economic crises since 2007, rising environmentalist anxiety, and migration crises have changed the prevailing mindset. Regardless of political ideology, most people in the West are probably more afraid of the *impotence* of the powerful and their inability to act and solve crises than of their *omnipotence* and the threat of the misuse of power.

To mobilize collective power and overcome this impotence, shared legitimacy is needed. While both sides of culture wars work with collective (id)entities, we have seen how permeated they are by the market imaginary, which is individualist in its basis. [Gergely Csányi and Eszter Kováts](#) have shown how even the contemporary left-wing emancipatory concept of intersectionality, proposed as a way of overcoming the politics of identity and individualism, has ended in the individualist situating his/her/their own privilege or disadvantage as a filling-in of Excel spreadsheets. [Václav Bělohradský](#) once called “depoliticized individualism” a “totalitarian ideology”—meaning, above all, that we cannot escape it. It has permeated not only political ideologies and cultural contents, but also the technical infrastructure of our culture, from TV to social media. Individualism exists and we all co-create it, just as citizens living under socialism co-produced the “regime,” in the analysis of Czech dissident [Václav Havel](#). Havel was able to mobilize some aspects of human individuality against the totalizing pressure of the post-totalitarian apparatus of state socialism. But are there any elements of human sociality that can be used to challenge the totality of depoliticized individualism?

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The opposite sides of culture wars are definitely not morally and politically equal. Nevertheless, mutual interaction means that they are caught in a single form that transforms them into something they did not want to be. Maybe this is one of the reasons for the culture war *nausea* declared by many of their actors: let’s give up the culture wars and talk about something real! This feeling is often expressed by voices on both sides. Sometimes it sounds

and works like an alibi, but we can recognize behind it a strong feeling of people caught in a dead end. Yet as we know from Freud, to escape from a “lowly” and humiliating position is not easy. By trying to escape culture wars rapidly and completely, we may end up making them even stronger. Maybe what we need to do now is Freudian work: to understand in which form we speak and act, how funny we are during it—and then try to change it, not to escape it.

Trying to find a short route to escaping culture wars mostly means engaging in nostalgic dreams about a world “before” that had clear landmarks enabling orientation—whether nation, democracy, or class. As Václav Bělohradský warns, this makes us “goofus birds of democracy” (Bělohradský borrows “goofus bird” from Borges’ *Zoologia fantastica*, which depicted a bird with its eyes looking back to describe the approach of going back to possibilities that have already been lost.) “Goofus birds of democracy” end mostly in “demophobia,” bewailing “the people,” who have supposedly misappropriated democratic values. In his book [*Time of Plebocracy. When Parts Are Larger than the Whole and the Weltgeist Has Fallen from Its Horse*](#) (2021), Bělohradský calls for hope to be placed in new, unstable, and somehow chaotic forms of creating active minorities or temporary majorities that are “post-catechetical,” as no catechism of any ideology can represent them. According to him, this new form of politics is reality, and in spite of all its problems, it also brings about the possibility of overcoming the power of various oligarchies and adequately reacting to the conditions of the anthropocene, which implies the radical politicization of everything.

In this context, the questions posed by culture wars are real and we cannot escape them. They concern the emancipation of oppressed minorities but also resonate with the anxieties of “silent majorities” (whatever this means and whether or not they are real “majorities”—for the most part probably not). We cannot jump through them to some “reality outside.” Indeed, a Brechtian “electing a different people” would be required.

Still, this should not be cause for resignation. When [Graff and Korolczuk](#) discussed how to react to anti-gender panic in Poland, instead of direct engagement with it, they gave priority to activities that could unite people from various milieus and create overlapping consensuses and new, surprising alliances around such topics as the situation of single mothers. They did not overcome the panic, but they at least reframed some questions. In the context of culture wars, we need this kind of imagination. Maybe, in such struggles and ideas, we can recognize a slow way to escape the culture wars and rebuild society from its individualist and identitarian ruins.

WHOSE WAR? THE NATURE AND ANALYSIS OF “CULTURE WARS” IN EUROPE AND BEYOND

by Anja Hennig

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The German language is known for its word-monsters. Some of its words, however, have entered the dictionaries of other languages. *Kulturkampf* is one such term, even if it is globally understood as meaning “culture war” rather than the literal translation “culture battle.” Coined by Rudolf Virchow in 1873, [*Kulturkampf*](#) characterizes the cultural struggle of German chancellor Otto von Bismarck, a Protestant, against the German Catholic Church between 1871 and 1885. Through the closure of Catholic institutions, he attempted to eradicate the influence of the Catholic Church in the newly created German Empire, which included the predominantly Protestant Prussia and was governed by a predominantly Protestant elite. In similar fashion, the U.S. socio-political landscape was [long shaped by a Protestant-Catholic \(plus Jewish\) divide](#): when the Protestants colonized America, they brought anti-Catholicism with them. Through the middle of the twentieth century, as McTague and Layman [explain](#), northern Protestants formed the backbone of the Republican coalition, while Catholics, Jews, black Protestants, and Southern Protestants tended to support the Democrats.

The Conceptual Nature of Culture Wars

The U.S. sociologist James D. Hunter, aware of the history of the German *Kulturkampf*, described moral-political conflicts in the U.S. since the 1970s as Culture Wars. In his view, the Protestant-Catholic cleavage was being *replaced by* a division between religious believers and increasingly secular adherents of, on the one hand, progressive and, on the other hand, traditionalist values. This “impulse towards progressivism” and towards “orthodoxy,” he believed, would [cut across religious denominations and political camps](#). With this theory, he sought—as the subtitle of his book indicates—to “make sense of the battles over family, art, education, law and politics.”

The Culture War concept relies on three main assumptions. First, it is [no longer the religious background](#)—whether Protestant, Catholic or Jewish—

of voters, presidents or lawyers that tends to polarize people, but rather their “particular locus and source of moral truth, the fundamental [...] moral allegiances of the actors” and their progressive or orthodox “cultural and political dispositions.” That observation corresponds with comparative research into religious fundamentalisms conducted by Almond et al and Brekke since the end of the 1980s, which found that the traditionalist, literal, selective reading of religious texts first identified in American Protestant fundamentalism exists in every religion worldwide. It is thus not any given religion but religious interpretation that may trigger harsh opposition to progressive abortion or partnership laws or to sex education ([Almond et al. 2003](#); [Brekke 2011](#)).

Second, and in this vein, much like progressive wings of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, orthodox wings are forming alliances to counter the [“influence the other seeks to exert in public culture.”](#)

Lastly, and most importantly, in the U.S. these battles are not simply about diverging views on abortion, homosexuality or education. They are also [closely intertwined](#) with a battle over the “meaning of America,” about how we order our lives together, the nature of community, and, thus, national identity.

Hunter wrote his seminal book [Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America](#) in 1991. At that time, the United States was experiencing the rise of the Moral Majority, the earliest Christian Right movement, which successfully supported Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign in 1980. Founded by the televangelist Jerry Falwell in response to progressive moral political developments since the 1970s, the Moral Majority quickly grew into a Baptist-dominated non-denominational Christian movement against gay rights, the right to abortion, contraception, sexual education, etc. As Wald and Calhoun-Brown [show](#), even though the Moral Majority ultimately disappeared as a movement, since the 1980s the Christian Right Movement became stronger over time.

Nowadays, the term “Culture Wars” is commonplace in titles and headlines. Why is that? I will approach this question through the lens of my own research and by looking at contemporary debates and developments.

Morality Policy Analysis

Trained in comparative politics and interested in the relationship between [religion and politics in post-secular Europe](#), I conducted [qualitative research](#) aimed at explaining why predominantly Catholic Poland, Italy, and Spain differed in their policy output regarding the regulation of abortion, artificial reproduction, and (homosexual) civil partnership laws. At a more

abstract level, the study aimed to identify general patterns and contextual structures affecting the interplay between religious and political actors in Europe, where religious adherence has been declining for decades but where the institutionalized relationship between Church and state has nevertheless [remained cooperative](#). Hunter's book was a relevant reference for such type of value conflicts where religious actors are involved.

Then I came across the "morality policy" concept. In his edited volume [*The Public Clash of Private Values: The Politics of Morality Policy*](#), the U.S. political scientist Christopher Z. Mooney collected analyses of U.S. battles over reproductive rights, gay rights, prostitution, gun control, and gambling since the era of the Reagan administration to elaborate on Meier's [concept](#) of "morality policy." The central idea was perfectly applicable to the European post-Cold War context: whereas Hunter's analysis centered on the worldviews and coalition-building of like-minded religious and political actors in a public sphere where religious arguments are [widely accepted](#), Mooney and his contributors concentrated on morality policy as a specific policy field, a conflictual political arena where (in principle) no material resources are distributed but behavior is regulated:

Morality Policy appears to move us out of the realm of facts and reason, where social scientists and especially political scholars feel comfortable, and into the realm of values [...]. To understand policy making at the turn of the millennium (at least in the United States and other Western democracies), however, one must understand the politics of morality policy ([Mooney 2001, 5](#)).

"Politics of morality policy" refers to the assumed particular conflictual character of the policy process surrounding morally sensitive issues, where religious actors are more involved than in other policy fields, where often incompatible worldviews clash, and thus where finding a compromise seems impossible—characteristics that clearly applied to the moral-political processes in Poland, Italy, and Spain, as well as in other parts of (Catholic) Europe, where, since the 1990s, legal initiatives to implement more permissive laws regulating behavior have been [provoking](#) harsh political controversies.

Interestingly, 2012 witnessed the arrival on the academic scene not only of my book (in German) *Morality Politics and Religion: Conditions for Religious-Political Cooperation in Poland, Italy, and Spain*, but also of the well-composed [volume](#) edited by Isabelle Engeli, Christopher Green-Pedersen, and Lars Thorup Larsen, *Morality Politics in Western Europe: Parties, Agendas, and Policy Choices*. A year later followed articles from Christoph Knill, a German

political scientist who had won an EU grant to analyze the pattern of morality politics in Europe, and his team ([Knill 2013](#); [Knill et al. 2014](#); [Euchner 2019](#)). Whereas the concept of “Morality Policy” made its breakthrough in European academia, “Culture Wars”—while addressing similar values conflicts—was apparently considered rather an American phenomenon. Moreover, despite the popularity of the metaphor, Hunter has also been met with skepticism, as [other scholars](#) have doubted the existence of orthodox and progressive alliances in politics. Others have seen [no evidence for wars](#), as most Americans would not have been interested in these conflicts.

In recent years, however, the term “Culture Wars” has experienced a revival, while morality policy approaches have largely remained confined to political science research. How can we explain the success of the term “Culture Wars”? And to what extent it is applicable to non-U.S. contexts?

Culture or Politics or War?

In May 2021 *Politico* published an [interview](#) with Hunter, now director of the University of Virginia’s Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. Reflecting on the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, he highlighted a relevant point for understanding “Culture Wars,” namely that these battles are always about both politics and culture, as they involve “(t)he mobilization of political resources—of people and votes and parties—around certain positions on cultural issues. In that sense, a ‘culture war’ is really about politics.” At the same time “deeper cultural dispositions”—not just attitudes and values—shape politics (Hunter, quoted in *Politico*). Empirically, one could study the intermingling of religious interpretations and processes of moral political regulation as a Culture War. Hunter suggests focusing more on “climatological changes” in terms of societal polarizations—changes that are “animating dynamics within democracy right now” (Hunter, quoted in *Politico*). Culture wars thus simultaneously shape and reflect how a society (the US) (re)defines its fundamental values.

Given the uncomfortable war metaphor, it may come as no surprise that neither in 1991 nor today has Hunter excluded the possibility of violence erupting: “Culture wars always precede shooting wars. They don’t *necessarily* lead to a shooting war, but you never have a shooting war without a culture war prior to it, because culture provides the justifications for violence” (Hunter, quoted in *Politico*).

Has Europe experienced shootings around moral-political conflicts? Admittedly, culture, religion, and national identity played a [fundamental role](#) during the war in the former Yugoslavia about the geopolitical

hegemony of ethnic identities. But to consider this war a Culture War would probably overstretch the concept.

Since February 24, 2022, however, in the context of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, Putin's brutal moral-political choreography of the last decade has been cast in a new, dark light. How much culture is in that war? As Kristina Stöckl, an expert on Russia, the Orthodox Church, and their joint defense of traditional values, [wrote](#) with Dmitry Uzlaner, Putin attacked Ukraine with the support of Patriarch Kirill because both find the West—with its liberal rights and values—"decadent." The "Gayropa" narrative was born to construct a line between the "liberal decadent West," which has since the Euromaidan in 2014 included Ukraine, and a "traditionalist Russia," then mobilize the population for a fight along that line. This fight is apparently also a competition over the meaning or re-conceptualization of Russia in an ideological and geopolitical sense.

Structural Differences

Even if the moral-political issues at stake are similar in the U.S. and in Europe, to what extent do such conflicts define the meaning of a nation in European states? In Poland and Hungary, for instance, where anti-gender politics have helped to create strong alliances between Catholic orthodox think tanks and the government against the Council of Europe's [Istanbul Convention on Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#), opposition to the Istanbul Convention has been [framed](#) by the two countries' governments as a duty to respect the national constitution and identity. Europe in this context, as discussed below, has become a reference for Christian traditional values e.g., in opposition to EU gender equality politics.

A clear contextual difference between Europe and the U.S. is the role of religion in social and public life. In Europe (unlike in the US), declining Christian religiosity and ongoing conflicts over religious symbols in the public sphere coincide with little tolerance for or tradition of religious rhetoric in the public sphere. In the U.S. (unlike in Europe), the constitutional separation between church and state has helped to create a [vivid and diverse landscape](#) of independent religious institutions and congregations.

There is also a stark contrast between Europe and the U.S. when it comes to non-governmental structures. In Europe, state co-funding exercises greater control over the nonprofit space, whereas in the US, "a lot of our charitable money—which is a massive amount compared to other countries—gets channeled through these charitable organizations that exist

with a take-no-prisoners policy; that define the enemy, that define a devil, that define transgressions in certain ways” (Hunter, quoted in Politico).

The last decade, however, as [Datta’s reports](#) reveal, has seen the establishment of myriad NGOs and think tanks (mostly affiliated with the Catholic Church) that—like the Polish or Croatian Institute for Legal Culture *Ordo Iuris*, with its economic and ideological links to the Brazilian Catholic fundamentalist “Tradition-Family-Property” organization—seek to sway the legal system according to their illiberal values. Some scholars are already [speaking](#) of a Christian Right in Europe. A [forthcoming book](#) attempts to grasp Christian-affiliated European NGOs’ increased organized political resistance to permissive reproductive rights, as well as to gender-sensitive political measures such as anti-discrimination programs in school curricula, transgender rights or the “old” demand for same-sex-partnerships, a development that has been accompanying the [rise of the radical right in Europe](#) for more than a decade.

Despite a trend toward converging morally illiberal lobby structures in Europe, my sense is that the institutionalized and resourceful resistance in the U.S. makes Culture Wars still more powerful there. Structural differences notwithstanding, to what extent can we see a convergence of conflict patterns between European states and the U.S. that explains (or even justifies) the increased use of the Culture Wars metaphor?

What Has Changed?

To begin with, Hunter points to a shift *within* the U.S. context from a “cultural conflict that took place primarily within the white middle class” to a “kind of class-culture conflict that has moved beyond the simple boundaries of religiosity.” More precisely, he argues that the fight against abortion since the 1970s has been replaced by race, as “race was never a very prominent part of *that* conflict.” He explains, “[Nowadays,] it is a position that is mainly rooted in fear of extinction. It is about race” (Hunter, quoted in Politico).

In June 2022, one year after Hunter’s interview, the U.S. Supreme Court [overturned](#) the *Roe vs. Wade* ruling that had guaranteed, since 1979, a constitutional right to abortion—a landmark ruling for the pro-life alliance. It might be that in cultural battles in the U.S. today, it is race and not abortion that tends, in Hunter’s sense, to define the meaning of the US. The demand for LGBT+ and permissive reproductive rights, however, *continue* to polarize parts of American society and fuel power-political competition. This can be seen in Democrats’ [unsuccessful fights](#) to fill vacant Supreme Court positions in recent years.

Transnationalization and Liberal Hegemony

What has really changed is that the Culture Wars have become globalized and are increasingly framed as fights for family rights. The U.S. Christian Right developed its pro-family narrative for such fights back in the 1970s, but in more recent years, Russian actors [have also become key forces](#) therein. The most prominent example of a U.S.-Russian alliance fueling a global Culture War is the [World Congress of Families](#).

My 2012 book mentioned two phases of value conflict in post-war Europe. The first phase is more global, marked by fierce national responses to the availability of contraception—which allowed “sex without reproduction”—and extending to the first fights over abortion and gay rights. The second phase is more European, as the [reconfiguration of Church-state relations](#) in Central and Eastern Europe after the Cold War went hand in hand with a re-negotiation for more permissive rules in Western and Southern Europe, while new possibilities of embryonic engineering challenged politics everywhere.

A third phase might now be the transnationalization of moral-political conflicts or Culture Wars, which includes the building of transnational issue networks such as [Agenda Europe](#), [One of Us](#), or the aforementioned [World Congress of Families](#); the creation of lobby structures in Brussels; and, thus, the formation of multi-level alliances across political systems and secular or religious cultures. In this phase, nothing less than the hegemony of the liberal project—with its principles of individual autonomy, cultural pluralism, and equal rights—is [contested](#), due especially to the widespread contestation of the hegemony of liberal values. I would not call it an Americanization of Culture Wars, despite the “old” question of life-and-death matters and the [prominent role](#) of U.S. actors in that process. Rather, we are facing a [new generation of transnational conflicts](#) where nothing less than the meaning of socio-cultural liberalism for Europe is at stake.

Although the contestation of the liberal project—or, as a new research consortium calls it, the [liberal script](#)—displays similar features, the dynamics, salience, and impact of such battles at the national level [clearly vary](#) due to differences in legacies and political structures. Relevant legacies relate to the pattern of Church-State relations and the public role of religion, to communism, and to EU-accession processes, as well as to current (individual) experiences with neoliberal transformations or the presence in government of [right-wing parties](#).

Culture Wars or Morality Politics?

It has become clear that with the global shift toward anti-gender politics, accompanied by [secular legal narratives](#) designed to safeguard the traditional family and children against gender-ideological indoctrination, the character of moral-political battles has changed worldwide. From a comparative perspective that looks at policy output, however, illiberal opponents to progressive legal changes have been more successful in the U.S. than in Europe due to differences in their religious-political contexts, lobbying structures, and access to political power. However, we may start to see the spread across Europe of similar illiberal developments covering politics *and* culture. Indeed, widespread use of the term Culture War suggests we are already there.

As such, returning to the questions laid out earlier in this paper, the Culture War concept seems to be applicable to cases in Europe (or even beyond) when it comes to conflicts over life/lifestyle-and-death matters like LGBT+ rights, reproductive rights, and assisted suicide, as well as sex education or prostitution. For an empirical or even comparative analysis of moral-political conflicts—their actors, (religious) ideologies, and strategies—the morality policy approach offers a more precise toolkit. The Culture Wars approach lacks the output-oriented analytical clarity of the morality policy approach, but it does identify a category of conflicts between liberal and illiberal worldviews over “culture” *and* over politics, the latter “primarily fueled by divisions on those issues, with leaders gaining power by inflaming resentments [...]” (Hunter, quoted in Politico). In this light, the two approaches arguably complement each other: whereas the entanglement of political power and culture may be better analyzed as a morality policy conflict, the reasons why such conflicts come into existence and the social effects thereof may be better explained or studied through the lens of Culture Wars. To simply label conflicts as Culture Wars does nothing but dilute the term.

Gender, Race, Class

I will end with a self-critical reminder to encourage more reflective research. Hunter sees “race” as the most relevant Culture War issue in the U.S. today. The European analogues could be Islamophobia, anti-immigration sentiments, and even antisemitism—a Culture War, horribly enough, fought by [individual armed radicals](#). The perspective of intersectionality teaches us that the positionalities of race, gender, religion or class do not exclude and even reinforce each other. Heterogenous protests against COVID-19 in various countries exemplify such categorial assemblage. Another example could be anti-gender protests among voters for right-wing populist parties. They may display more class-related anti-

establishment opposition than a religiously grounded fear of the “dissolution of heterosexuality,” yet the latter should also be taken into consideration. The Culture War concept, moreover, assumes a dichotomic conflict between traditionalists and progressives. To avoid an oversimplification or even essentialization of conflicts as black and white, researchers should seek to [untangle their complexity](#)—even through the lens of Culture Wars and probably with a (more precise) morality policy analysis.

CULTURE WARS IN CENTRAL EUROPE: A DIFFERENT PLAYBOOK WITH EVOLVING ACTORS

by Zora Hesová

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Since the 2010s, culture wars have increasingly become the language of political conflict in Central Europe (CE). The last presidential election in Poland and Slovakia, and polarized general elections in Hungary, revolved around liberalism, gender ideology, the social legitimacy of public homosexuality, gay adoption rights, and abortion—much like in the United States (U.S.). All over CE, political stands on cultural issues now appear more important than positions on taxes, pensions, and budgets (when we leave out the war in Ukraine, of course).

The current conceptualization of “cultural wars” was first proposed by American sociologist [James D. Hunter](#) to describe right-wing populist strategies and recurring polarizing conflicts regarding changes of social norms and recognition of minority rights. But due to the seemingly liberal heritage of Communism in Central Europe the politicization of gender, abortion, and gay rights is rather unexpected. In fact, cultural conflicts there do exhibit discourses, and activist networks, and repertoire reminiscent of American culture wars. But it would be wrong to see them as an extension of U.S. culture wars. Depending on how we define them, Central European culture wars are in substantial aspects markedly different from the U.S. case. The reason is not primarily the rather problematic legacy of Communism itself but the specificities of Central Europe’s post-communist history.

Culture Wars or Culturalization?

Conflicts about identity, values, and norms are part of ordinary politics. The term *culture wars* highlight a greater intensity, a polarizing quality, and an instrumental nature of newer conflicts over values. When Europeans were discussing whether to mention God in the preamble to the planned European constitution in 2003 and 2004, they divided along secular and religious, socialist, and Catholic lines. The issue prompted heated debates, dozens of amendments, Church interventions, and public lectures by prominent intellectuals questioning Europe’s intellectual and moral roots. It ended in a compromise: the preamble mentioned both Christianity and

humanism. Like debates about euthanasia and stem cell research, the constitution project caused a confrontation about modern values and the place of religion in modern Europe. But unlike today's culture wars, these debates appeared civil, the arguments were rational, and the outcome was a compromise adopted among a plurality of voices.

Recent conflicts about abortion, gender, and gay rights are markedly different. I understand culture wars as conflicts that are not meant to be resolved but, rather, that are fought to be won, typically by placing a symbol in a public space or a legislative change against resistance of the others. Culture wars do not entail negotiation, argumentation, or compromise seeking, but they are meant to mobilize using the image of a threatening enemy, such legally failing but politically "successful" referenda on same sex-marriage in Slovakia and Romania. The concept of culture wars so reflects militancy, zero-sum beliefs, an antagonistic view of politics where one group always benefits at the expense of the other, and a framing of social change (or resistance to it) as a threat and indicative of decline.

Yet the notion of culture wars is also an actor's concept, a labelling tool of an actual culture war. It operates with a cultural or identitarian "us" versus "them" divide and brings about the assumption that there is a duality between groups—i.e., conservatives and a liberal Hungary; Poland A and Poland B, a "Prague coffeehouse" and a Czech beer house, an urban Slovakia and the "empty East" opposing each other. By repeating the assumption of an inherently polarized society, cultural warriors preclude compromise and incite and even perform such a division. Rare moments of respite—seen in the elections of a politician beyond the fray, such as Slovakia's Zuzana Čaputová, or when a major crisis like the war in Ukraine silences major cultural warriors for a time—reveal that the talk of ideological division is an often effect of super-polarizing events.

Even in the absence of a well-defined and stable ideological polarization, the culture wars phenomenon confirms a stable trend towards *a culturalization of political cleavages* and conflicts. Politics dealing with socio-economic issues, that is, conflicts over redistribution (i.e., taxes), reform projects (i.e., pensions, healthcare, education, and decentralization) and visions of society (i.e., type of growth and investment, and climate change related policies), are regularly colonized and side-lined by conflicts over social norms and values. Substantial conflictual episodes are increasingly framed in cultural terms, that is, as expressions of conflicting cultural stances and group identities.

Unlike the U.S. where positions in the culture war have largely realigned with party politics, in CE (with the exception of Hungary) the picture is

different. There are various kinds of purported militant identities in CE: besides liberals and conservatives, cultural conflicts involve positions of the past (“anti-communists” vs. “revisionists” of various kinds), on migration (“patriots” and anti-Islamists vs. “welcomers,” “sunshines,” and “dogooders”), on national identity (Christianists vs. “denationalized cosmopolitans”), on gender (“traditionalists” vs. “genderists”) and on geopolitics (“Russophiles” vs. “Europhiles” and “Russophobes”). There is, in fact, a plethora of conflicts defined in cultural terms. that only sometimes coalesce into super-polarized forms (e.g., during presidential elections).

Three Fields of Culture Wars in Central Europe

This wide range of cultural stances has evolved in time and invested various issues that can be subsumed in the following typology of issues: [politics of memory; politics of identity; and politics of morality](#).

The so-called *politics of memory* is the oldest and most typically Central European field of culture wars that started in the mid 2000s. From Warsaw to Zagreb, these are public disputes over the legacy of communism, and over national victimhood and the legitimacy of Nazi-supported national states in the Second World War. These disputes have escaped academic circles to enter public spaces: during annual war commemorations, around crosses and statues in city squares, through provocations in popular culture, in amateur revisionist circles, in state sponsored institutions, and in parliaments. Polarization on behalf of the concept of the so-called “Polish camps” and “Polish” guilt, the controversial and sometimes outright revisionist rehabilitation of symbols and figures of the Slovak state, Croatian Ustasas, and Hungary’s Horthy regime have divided societies well before recent “[morality wars](#).” They were used by political challengers and civil society actors to up-end the pro-European consensus on defining moral lessons of the past in terms of a response to WWII. Unlike much weaker memory wars in Western Europe, where liberals disclose and problematize the legacy of colonialism, memory wars in CE have been fought to “nationalize” memory regimes and reawaken victimhood after CE adopted the Holocaust-centered European moral framework of memory regimes. In other words, the politicization of the past allowed neo-nationalist figures to antagonize pro-European liberals and mobilize on emotionally charged issues.

The so-called *politics of identity* sparked the most sudden and transforming eruption in CE politics in 2015. The culturalized framing of the so-called refugee crisis created an unprecedented polarization. The issues of migration and Islam were void of any pragmatic consideration and were systematically framed by right-wing, populist but also centrist parties, while the media was branded as a threat to “national traditions” and “Western

civilization." The "civilizational" quality of the threat of Islam, i.e., Europe's "Other," the purported blindness of liberal elites towards it, and the opportunities of electronic communication, led to the politicization of previously apolitical citizens. Only liberal media, and dwellers of larger cities, non-parliamentarian left, civil society organizations and academia, parts of business reliant on the immigrant workforce, and a minority in the Church called (in vain) for humanitarian and pragmatic responses. Unlike previous memory wars, attitudes towards migration and Islam divided societies down to the family sphere and built a pattern of antagonistic, anti-elite politicization that would be reactivated half a decade later.

In the political sphere, the creation of a sense of danger and the framing of national identity in opposition to Islam and to so-called liberal elites or "Brussels" kept Islam and migration in the public debate for years. Migration and Islam became such powerfully mobilizing causes and toxic issues that none of the socialist or liberal parties dared to show any degree of openness to migration in order to pragmatically address asylum policy and the humanitarian catastrophe on the margins of Europe. Rather, the cultural framing of migration electorally strengthened populist politicians across the board and gave them an issue to instrumentalize in elections—even to nominal socialists such as Miloš Zeman and Robert Fico. Opposition to migration pushed many former socialists and liberals to the national-conservative camp. It also gave the Visegrád Group (V4) a sense of purpose—the defense of Europe against itself by the last defenders of "real Europe" and her national and religious tradition. This newly found self-assurance against Brussels introduced two new threatening "Others"—Islam and European liberal elites—and fostered the belief that civilizational identity is an issue worthy of a culture war.

Only conflicts in the so-called *politics of morality* somewhat echo U.S. culture wars. Since around 2013, mobilizations started on behalf of conservative social norms, the restriction of abortion, and opposition to gay rights. If many of the anti-abortion activists' networks were linked to U.S. groups or inspired by the kind of legal advocacy that was developed in the U.S. culture wars, CE morality mobilizations have a European dimension. Major mobilizations have been linked to the Vatican [discourse](#) on "gender ideology." This phrase was used by a host of influential Western European Catholic writers and by Central European Catholic hierarchy to project into the theoretical concept of "gender" a malicious intention to destroy sexual difference and to dissolve all social hierarchy and cohesion. Since 2013, right wing populists have joined in the systematic scare campaigns against "gender ideology" to justify opposition to gay marriage, to adoptions by gay couples and generally to the legitimacy of public homosexuality.

These mobilizations were instigated partly by conservative activist groups who were borrowing discourses (e. g., “anti-gender” rather than overtly homophobic or religious), visuals and repertoires (e.g., petitions, referenda, poster campaigns, and lawsuits), and goals (e.g., large scale mobilizations to change legislation) from transnational networks (such as the French “La Manif pour tous,” replicated in various CE “Alliances” for family and U.S. advocacy groups). National conservatives in power – such as Polish PiS, Hungarian FIDESZ and Slovak Sme Rodina (We are family) – have amply used the politics of morality both to mobilize their support base against liberal opponents and to gain control of cultural and academic institutions and of public administration. They were replaced liberal actors and policies by others who were signaling their political allegiance by using the talk of “family mainstreaming” rather than “gender mainstreaming” or by supporting nativism and “tradition” rather than universalism in social policies.

The [politics of morality](#) is currently the strongest source of culturally framed confrontations in CE. There is an effect of amplification as cultural confrontations develop into confrontations between a broadening national-conservative camp and the “Other” sedimented in various culture wars. From internal enemies (such as national minorities and the Roma), recent culture wars have moved the target of nationalist activism towards a much larger image: a post-national EU, a multicultural Europe, and liberal global elites and their local representatives. Even there, attitudes towards Russia, NATO and the EU, and vaccination, divide the national conservative camp down the middle. Polish and Hungarian right-wing culture warriors famously clash on behalf of Russia, as do national conservatives among themselves in Slovakia and Czechia.

Shifting Political Conflict to the Right

As the overview of the various fields of culture wars shows, the term of “culture wars” remains too ambiguous and its use is ambivalent. In CE, culture wars cannot be easily defined as ideological confrontations between liberals and conservatives. Every country has developed its own mix of cultural battles whereby warriors engage in various fields culturalized conflicts: memory remains strong in Croatia and Czechia, while morality is a salient issue in Poland and Slovakia. Both PiS and Fidesz focused on WWII memory, anti-Islam, and gender at various times.

The ambiguity of culture wars comes from the fact that the purported ideological confrontation appears to be openly instrumental. Rather than being mere expressions of some anti-liberal backlash (an argument proposed by [Krastev and Holmes](#)), culture wars have become a style of politics focused on culturalized polarisation. As argued in [a recent book](#) by

Barša, Hesová, and Slačálek, there is a specific context in which culture was broke out in CE: the EU accession, the breakdown of liberal–conservative alliances, and increased competition on the right.

Central European countries have all experienced a rare political consensus from mid 1990s to mid-2000s (e.g., in Croatia between early 2000s and 2013). The goal of entering the EU and NATO was paramount for gaining a firm anchorage in Western economic and security structures. This symbolic aim was accompanied by the Europe-inspired transformation towards liberal democratic institutions, market economies, and the integration into the global economic system. All those processes were carried out by strong liberal–conservative alliances in which post-communist, socialist, Christian, and conservative parties fostered a stable liberal–conservative consensus. Once the goal of EU accession was accomplished, the programmatic void was not filled with another great vision. Rather, symbolic and normative consequences of Europeanization gradually came under scrutiny. The European memory framework that saw 1945 as a year of liberation was challenged by efforts to include communism and nationalize WWII memory. Liberal social norms had no history reaching back to the 1960s. They were often imposed through legal integration and had to be fought out by local civil society against local resistance. Western European struggles over multiculturalism started to be seen as a marker of “civilizational” decline for CE, where relatively recent ethnic homogeneity was consecrated as a pillar of young national states.

Most importantly, the liberal–conservative consensus on the right disintegrated from the mid-2000s onwards. As Anne Applebaum [related](#) about Poland, many conservative and nationalist groups and public figures in all CE countries have abandoned earlier liberal attitudes and have started distinguish themselves from liberals of the socialists and conservatives on traditionalist grounds. Increased competition on the right-wing spectrum has led to the struggle for the hegemony over national identity or Christian voice in politics all over CE. Because there was little socio-economic ground for a distinction, the fragmented right has resorted to cultural issues in their quest for political leverage. Importantly, these struggles on the right led to the mainstreaming of radical right issues (e.g., anti-Islam, anti-migration, anti-minority politics) now framed in cultural (religious) and not in racial or ethnic terms, and to the integration of the radical right in parliament politics across CE.

Covid, local climate-change-related crises, and the war in Ukraine brought new conflicts that, at first, seemed to stand free of the tendency to culturalize political conflicts in CE. Ukrainian migration, for example, has not been framed culturally and, except for Hungary, CE stands behind

Ukraine. But as with earlier culture wars, polarizing sediments manage to play a part in later conflicts. Newer conflict lines may develop between those who support the EU, Ukraine, and their policies, and between those who are locally minded, whose cultural “Other” now includes the EU, migration and liberalism, globalized elites, or those who have little confidence in state institutions and blame the effects of Russia’s war on Western “intransigence.” A CE version of the “alt-right” may well be the new cultural warrior.

FASCISTS VS. ANTI-FASCISTS OR SELF-RIGHTEOUS COSMOPOLITANS VS. LEFT-BEHIND COMMUNITARIANS? REFLECTIONS ON POLITICAL AND CULTURAL POLARIZATION TODAY

by Floris Biskamp

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We¹ undoubtedly live in polarized times. There are a host of issues on which opinions are sharply divided, with the opposing sides portraying each other's opinion not only as factually wrong, but also as morally evil. This polarization often takes the form of a "culture war" in which a liberal and progressive culture, on the one side, is pitted against a traditional or even authoritarian culture, on the other side. While hardly anyone questions the existence of such polarization, the question of how it should be framed and explained is a matter of debate, as is the way one should deal with it.

This paper contrasts two different approaches. The first approach focuses on far-right ideology and frames the polarization as one between *authoritarianism or even fascism*, on the one hand, and *righteous anti-fascism*, on the other hand. The second approach, which claims to be more neutral and sociological, portrays the polarization as one between *self-righteous better-off cosmopolitans*, on the one hand, and *frustrated forgotten communarians*, on the other hand. I argue that while both approaches teach important lessons and should be taken seriously, neither of them should be taken at face value. If one wants to understand the current polarization and act responsibly within it, one should heed the warnings of both approaches. In the remainder of the article, I will first sketch the two approaches and then discuss their validity and interrelation.

Fascists vs. Anti-Fascists

The first of the two approaches is based on an analysis of and opposition to far-right ideology. A condensed and pointed version of this ideology can be found in the conspiracy theory of "The Great Replacement," which is spread by far-right online activists, as well as by far-right parties and their

¹ This text is an abridged version of an [earlier publication](#).

leaders ([Cosentino, 2020](#); [Davey & Ebner, 2019](#); [Obaidi et al., 2021](#)). According to this theory, populations of Western nations are being deliberately “replaced” with non-Western foreigners in order to make the populations more easily governable and exploitable. In this imagination, the original population—or “[the pure people](#)”—is composed of simple, hard-working, decent, and loyal people pursuing a traditional lifestyle and trying their best in life.

At least implicitly, they are portrayed as white heterosexual natives. Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders refers to them as “Henk and Ingrid,” choosing two “typically Dutch” names—with their [typicality being determined in a nativist fashion](#). The foreign others are portrayed as indecent, criminal, wild, sexually backwards, lazy, greedy, etc. They are described sometimes as invading armies or colonizers, sometimes as a threatening natural force, like water pushing against the floodgates of a city. Depending on the specific context, these external enemies are variously identified as Muslims, Africans, or Latin Americans.

As is usual in populist ideologies, this [idea](#) of “the pure people” is contrasted with “the corrupt elite.” In the conspiracy theory of “The Great Replacement,” this elite is composed of two parts. First, there are those who supposedly rule the world, manipulating, dominating, and exploiting the masses. This small group supposedly masterminds and oversees the whole operation of the “Replacement,” leading foreigners into Western countries. This group is identified with political and economic elites, particularly in the finance industry. Second, there is a group that is portrayed as a part of “the corrupt elites” but that is larger in numbers and plays a different role. Rather than all-powerful evildoers, these people are portrayed as degenerate, naive weaklings who do not understand what is really happening but have fallen prey to an ideology misrepresenting this heinous crime as noble humane action. The social groups identified with this image are typically liberals, supporters of green parties, academics from the humanities, journalists, feminists, antiracists, etc.

The narrative of “The Great Replacement” is racist, anti-Semitic, and often also heterosexist (i.e., patriarchal, misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic). The portrayal of migrant foreign others as an uncivilized, unruly, irrational, and sexually dangerous group is a direct continuation of classic racist stereotyping. The portrayal of a small conspiratorial elite dominating the world is a direct continuation of classic anti-Semitic imagery—and it is no coincidence that the narrative of “The Great Replacement” often names Jewish individuals such as George Soros as the main culprits. The portrayal of the naive weaklings likewise has a pre-history

in anti-Semitic imagery, being used to depict degenerate non-Jewish groups who knowingly or unknowingly help the Jews.

This narrative is often not only heteronormative, but also misogynistic and homophobic, portraying “the pure people” as “traditional” and straight, but feminism, homosexuality, and queerness as degenerate. Yet in some cases, it can also be combined with “femonationalist” or “homonationalist” discourses to pit a sexually “progressive” West against Muslim others portrayed as culturally backwards ([Hark & Villa, 2017](#); [Mudde, 2019](#)).

One can go one step further and describe this ideology not only as racist and anti-Semitic, but even as a continuation of the ideology of National Socialism. National Socialist ideology was centered around the idea of the Aryan race being weakened by liberal degeneration and threatened by a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Of course, far-right discourses today cannot simply be identified with National Socialism. There are indeed fascist, terrorist mass murderers who invoke the narrative of “The Great Replacement” to justify their actions—as with the terrorist who killed 51 people in attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 ([Cosentino, 2020](#)). Most of the present-day far right articulates its ideology in less extreme forms. Yet the ideological continuity between far-right ideology then and now remains.

So what are the implications of this first approach for political polarization? First, the far-right ideology on which this approach focuses is itself polarizing, since it portrays the racialized others and the “replacists” as enemies that must be fought. Second, this ideology warrants a polarizing response from others. If relevant political forces pursue racist and anti-Semitic ideologies that are a continuation of National Socialist ideology, then democratic actors should react with direct anti-fascist opposition, not with conciliation or appeasement.

Cosmopolitans vs. Communitarians

The second approach questions this kind of anti-fascism and points to the danger that this righteousness might be sheer self-righteousness driven by the ignorance of people in a privileged position. The literature taking this approach argues that society is polarized between *cosmopolitanism* and *communitarianism*. Its proponents thereby add a twist to the undoubted polarization between the far right and its adversaries, claiming that this division is—at least to some degree—also a class struggle between the lower and higher strata of society. In English, the most notable exponent of this approach is the journalist and best-selling author [David Goodhart](#); in German, the relevant authors include sociologist [Cornelia Koppetsch](#)

and political scientist [Wolfgang Merkel](#). The most extensive attempt at empirical validation has been made by a research group at the [WZB Berlin](#).

In slightly different ways, these authors claim that the rise of the far right is driven by a “new cleavage,” meaning a social and political divide between two groups. Goodhart calls these groups the *somewheres* and the *anywheres*; Merkel and the WZB group use the terms *communitarians* and *cosmopolitans*; and Koppetsch shifts between terms. But while these scholars assign different names to the two groups, the ways in which they characterize them and explain their emergence are very similar. Their basic assumption is that there have been several major social transformations over the course of recent decades. The most notable is the process of globalization, with national borders becoming less and less significant for economic, political, social, and cultural interactions. But it is not only the interaction between societies that has changed; societies have also transformed internally. There has been a general process of social liberalization. “Traditional” virtues and values have been weakened, while more individualistic, aestheticized lifestyles have become more widespread. The proponents of the cosmopolitanism/communitarianism thesis emphasize that such social transformations tend to produce winners and losers, supporters and opponents ([Goodhart, 2017](#); [Koppetsch, 2019](#); [Merkel, 2017](#)).

The *cosmopolitans* or the *anywhere* are said to be winners from and supporters of these changes. They disproportionately hold higher education degrees and have internalized the new values of neoliberalism, individualism, and diversity. Both their formal qualifications and their ability to communicate in many languages allow them to cross borders with ease, to live in one country today and another tomorrow. But within these countries they can mostly be found in the bigger cities—cities that largely resemble one another. They think of themselves as being very progressive, asserting this progressiveness by engaging in politics of identity, diversity, and anti-fascism ([Goodhart, 2017](#); [Koppetsch, 2019](#); [Merkel, 2017](#)).

The losers and opponents of these transformations are called the *communitarians* or the *somewheres*. They are disproportionately manual laborers who live in the countryside—but their number also includes more traditionally minded elites and middle classes who have not benefitted from globalization and who reject cultural liberalization. They have a harder time crossing now-porous borders because they are bound to the territory where they live. For some of them, this is because they do not have a job qualification that would allow them to take up work elsewhere easily. Others among them might be able to do so but do not want to because they like the more traditionalist, more collective lifestyle they enjoy in their home communities. While the cosmopolitans strive for universalism, the

communitarians strive for a particular community ([Goodhart, 2017](#); [Koppetsch, 2019](#); [Merkel, 2017](#)).

The interrelation between the two groups is portrayed as asymmetrical. The cosmopolitans have become a new dominant class, enjoying not only greater resources and chances in life, but also hegemony, in the sense that *their* values are the ones that count in public discourse. The communitarians, on the other hand, have seen their values devalued and ridiculed as backwards. From this angle, voting for far-right populist parties is seen as a (misguided and dangerous) form of resistance or self-defense by somewhere or communitarians fighting against their marginalization—or their loss of privilege. These groups used to have well-established stable positions in the world—but then the world changed and now they feel left behind. And not only do they have to cope with being the losers of social transformation, but they also feel that all the major political parties support these transformations, leaving them unrepresented. This leaves them frustrated, and in their frustration, they turn to far-right populists to represent them and their anger ([Goodhart, 2017](#); [Koppetsch, 2019](#); [Merkel, 2017](#)).

In this second approach, culture, society, and politics still appear to be polarized. Yet the framing of this polarization is very different than in the first approach. What previously appeared to be the hateful assertive struggle of racist, anti-Semitic, and heterosexist successors of National Socialism now appears to be the desperate resistance of groups that have been overrun and left behind. This also reverses the depiction of the opposing side: whereas before they appeared to be righteous democrats and anti-fascists fighting for equality and liberty, they are now depicted as a self-righteous dominant class that is engaged in ridiculing and vilifying a dominated class that is doing nothing more than resisting its marginalization. That this dominant class depicts its opponents as the new fascists (as the first approach does, and I did in section 1), then, only seems to add insult to injury.

Conclusion

On an ethical-political level, each approach implies an urgent warning, with a strong tension between the two. The first approach warns against complacency in the face of anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian politics; the second warns against self-righteousness. On an empirical-analytical level, the two approaches aim at different layers of analysis. Therefore, their descriptions are not mutually exclusive. The first approach aims at the political ideology of far-right actors, the second at the political sociology of far-right support among voters. It may very well be true *both* that far-right parties and their networks in civil-society are racist, antisemitic,

heterosexist, and anti-democratic *and* that support for these actors is driven by frustration over and opposition to processes of globalization and sociocultural liberalization.

This article cannot offer a [thorough evaluation](#) of the empirical validity of the two approaches nor discuss the implications of the analogies that can be found between the worldview of far-right ideology criticized in the first approach and the depiction of society offered by the second approach. But it must be remarked that both need to be taken with a grain of salt—and the second approach with two.

The first approach runs the risk of exaggeration and moralization. While it is true that many far-right actors, including major parties in parliament, push ideologies such as that of “The Great Replacement,” it would be an oversimplification and exaggeration to categorize all these parties as reincarnations of fascism. While some parties, such as the AfD in Germany, are on a path of continuous radicalization, others elsewhere in Europe, such as the DF in Denmark, are anti-egalitarian and nativist but hardly fascist—and this is even more true of the motivations of these parties’ supporters.²

The second approach tells a very good story and seems very convincing at first glance. Yet upon closer inspection, it does not quite hold sociological water. It is true that there have been processes of globalization and liberalization; it is true that globalization produces winners and losers; it is true that liberalization is welcomed by some parts of the population but opposed by others; it is true that the share of far-right voters is disproportionately high in lower strata. Thus, there is good reason to heed the warning that opposition to the far right should be careful not to be self-righteous.

To date, however, none of the proponents of the “new cleavage” approach have been able to present convincing evidence that there actually is a globalization-induced cleavage dividing two groups that could reasonably be termed “cosmopolitans” and “communitarians.” If we look at demographics, it is very hard to pinpoint which groups exactly are winners and losers of globalization. The multi-dimensional process of globalization affects many groups in different, contradictory ways at the same time (as producers/employees, as consumers, as individuals, as members of a group/class, etc.). If we look at voter preferences or political party positions, it is simply not the case that those who favor open borders for

² However, it must be noted that the same was true of historical Nazism: Not all of its voters were fully convinced by national socialist ideology. But the consequences are still the same.

goods and capital also favor open borders for migrants—quite the opposite (Biskamp, [2020b](#), [2020a](#)).

If we want to explain today's political dynamics, the now classic two-dimensional conception, with one sociocultural and one socioeconomic axis, still offers better explanations than a new cleavage could—and support for the far right is best explained by the sociocultural axis, especially by nativism. If anything, there is good reason to add a third dimension ([Kitschelt, 2012](#); [Lux et al., 2022](#)) rather than reduce it to one new cleavage.³ There seems to be little sociological need to create a narrative of a struggle between self-righteous cosmopolitans and left-behind communitarians—particularly if this narrative is ridden with tired clichés of self-righteous liberals and left-behind good folks that are quite similar to the clichés produced by far-right ideology.

These caveats notwithstanding, the warnings of both approaches should be heeded. When discussing cultural and political polarization and the rise of the far right, one should never forget the warnings of the first approach: far-right ideology is racist, anti-Semitic, heterosexist, and authoritarian. It attacks the weakest members of society and encourages oppression, violence, and even murder. Therefore, there are good normative reasons for democrats to take a strong—and polarizing!—normative stand against it.

Despite all the problems of the second approach, its warnings should be heeded as well. A simple and self-righteous opposition between a good, liberal, open-minded, and progressive culture, on the one hand, and a bad, racist, close-minded, and regressive culture, on the other hand, is neither helpful nor justified. Those who take a stand against the far right should be very careful not to be hypocritical or arrogant. They should pay attention to legitimate social and economic grievances—including, but not limited to, the grievances of those who support far-right parties and politicians. But in doing so, they should never rationalize far-right ideology nor—even worse—privilege the grievances of far-right supporters over the grievances of others. Supporting the far right should *not* become a pathway to receiving disproportionate empathy.

³ Kitschelt distinguishes three dimensions: “group,” referring to questions of polity membership in general and questions of migration in particular; “grid,” referring to the libertarian-authoritarian divide; and “greed,” referring to questions of redistribution. Lux et al. identify four dimensions: “up-down,” referring to economic distribution; “in-out,” referring to migration; “we-them,” referring to diversity; and “today-tomorrow,” referring to generational justice.

THE POPULIST BACKLASH AGAINST GLOBALIZATION: ECONOMIC INSECURITY OR CULTURE WAR?

by Gabor Scheiring

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Populism scholars cannot ignore the robust causal evidence on the disruptive political effects of economic insecurity and claim that economic factors play no role in populism. To beat right-wing populism, politicians and policymakers need to tackle economic insecurity.

An Unresolved Debate

The rise of populism is at the heart of the biggest debates in politics and the social sciences. An unresolved animating question is how the culture war and economic insecurity contribute to this populist backlash. Proponents of the cultural argument argue that populism is an adverse reaction to cultural progressivism and cosmopolitan values among less-educated white men, whose fears of status loss have nothing to do with material reality (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Others contend that economic globalization, deindustrialization, the global financial crisis, and technological change result in economic insecurity, catalyzing populism (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

The dominant perception in the literature is that economic insecurity is not strongly related to populism. A [recent narrative review](#) concluded that “the evidence that those directly hurt by globalization are more likely to vote for anti-globalization parties or proposals is mixed.” [Another narrative review](#) reached a similar conclusion, highlighting that “the evidence linking individual economic grievances to populist voting is not particularly strong,” while “scholars consistently find strong connections between individuals’ views on sociocultural issues and right-wing populist voting.”

In short, while the research on populism could fill libraries, there is still a great deal of confusion about the role and relationship of the culture war and economic insecurity as catalysts of populism. Researchers often regard economic factors as secondary. This essay aims to bring some clarity to the discussion and establish common ground by reviewing and synthesizing the

existing causal evidence on whether economic insecurity catalyzes populism.

Cutting Through the Fog: A Systematic Review of the Literature

A systematic review has several benefits compared to classic narrative reviews. A systematic review “[locates existing studies](#), selects and evaluates contributions, analyses and synthesizes data, and reports the evidence in such a way that allows reasonably clear conclusions to be reached about what is and is not known.” Narrative literature reviews — either stand-alone or as part of an empirical study — might reflect the priorities and conceptual framework of the researcher. By conforming to the standards expected of primary research, systematic reviews can [significantly reduce bias, increase transparency, and be subject to replication](#). Because of its beneficial properties, a systematic review sits at the top of the evidence hierarchy.

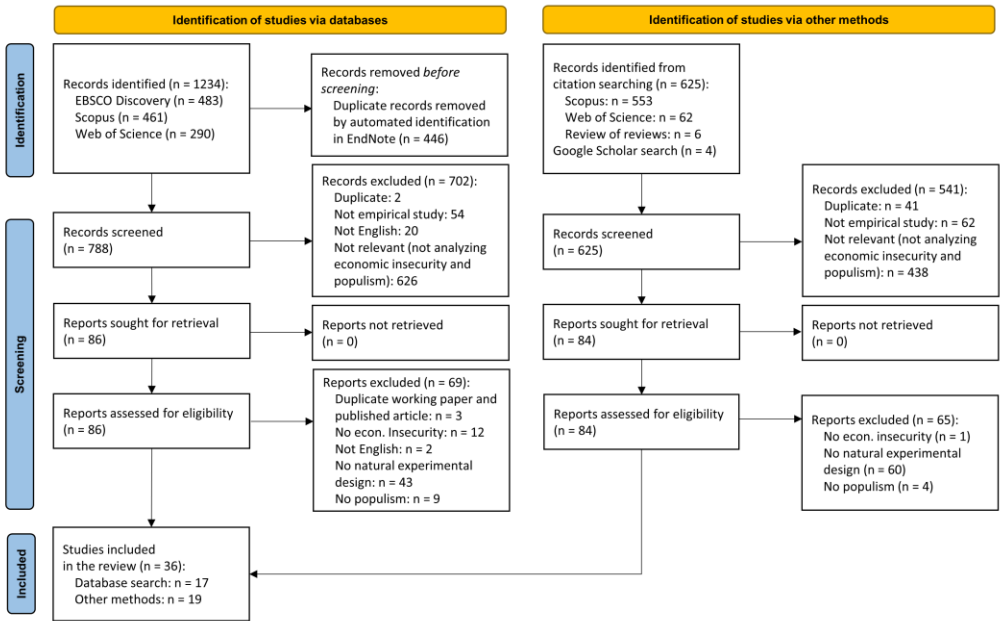
In the collaborative research underlying this essay,¹ we followed a complex systematic search strategy as outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) [guidelines](#). We combined an academic database search with a backward citation search of the eligible studies and a review of recently published narrative reviews. We included studies that focus on populist political behavior as the outcome, economic insecurity broadly defined as treatment, and follow a quasi-experimental research design to identify causality.

[Quasi-experimental studies](#) “aim to make causal inferences about the effects of an exposure or intervention of interest on outcomes by exploiting exogenous variation in treatment assignment.” Although quasi-experiments cannot unequivocally prove the existence of a causal association, they do a better job than observational studies.

After screening and excluding ineligible papers, we reviewed and synthesized 36 studies fulfilling our inclusion criteria. The flow chart in Figure 1 describes the process and method of this systematic review following the PRISMA guidelines.

¹ Gabor Scheiring, Manuel Serrano-Alarcón, Alexandru Moise, Courtney McNamara, and David Stuckler, “The Populist Backlash against Globalization: A Systematic Review of the Causal Evidence That Economic Insecurity Is a Catalyst of Populism,” 2022, Manuscript, Dondena Research Center, Department of Social and Political Sciences, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart summarizing the systematic review process

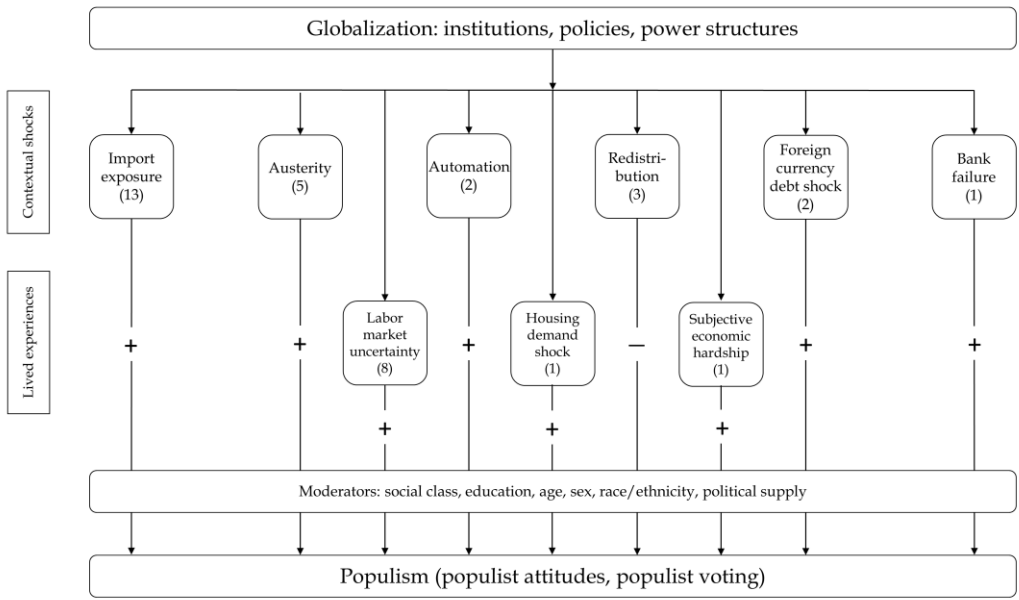


A Bird's-Eye View of Economic Insecurity and Populism

We found 36 studies that fulfilled our inclusion criteria, as summarized in Table 1 in the Appendix. All 36 studies report a robust causal link between economic insecurity and populism. A recurring effect size is that economic shocks and economic insecurity explain around one-third of recent surges in populism.

Based on the reviewed studies, Figure 2 presents an overview of the relationship between economic insecurity and populism. The number in brackets indicate the number of studies analyzing the association. Contextual-level shocks include import exposure, austerity, automation, redistribution, foreign currency debt, and bank failure. Labor market uncertainty, housing demand shock, parental unemployment, and subjective economic hardship are indicators of lived experiences. These can be both considered independent causes and mediators of the upstream shocks. Redistribution refers to a set of policies that can offset the negative health effect of economic insecurity, hence the negative sign.

Figure 2. The multi-channel causal relationship between economic insecurity and populism



The literature also identified important moderators, such as class, education, age, sex, race/ethnicity, political supply (the availability or lack of populist candidates for whom to vote, their political strategy, and the availability of alternatives) and social security policies. These moderators influence how economic shocks and subjects' lived experiences translate into populism. Finally, the literature has identified two populist outcomes: cultural backlash and political behaviors. We concentrated our review on the latter. However, we found seven studies showing that cultural backlash mediates the effect of economic insecurity on populist political behavior. These studies show that the cultural backlash is in part a consequence of economic insecurity, and not a fully independent cause.

From Economic Shocks to Populism

The import share from low-wage countries grew from 15% to 28% in the 2000s in the US, with China accounting for 89% of the increase. This “China shock” has [wide-ranging consequences](#) for [American workers](#), leading to the closure of manufacturing plants, a drop in employment, and increasing declining life expectancy.

This China shock also has pervasive political implications. A path-breaking study showed that import exposure in the U.S. in the 2000s led to an increase in the campaign contributions by more ideologically extreme donors on both sides of the spectrum, increased the popularity of conservative media (focusing on Fox News), and conservative viewpoints (measured by the Pew Ideology Score). Electoral districts with greater exposure to Chinese imports were more likely to elect Republican members of Congress after 2010 largely at the cost of moderate Democrats. They also saw a moderate increase in the vote share of Republican presidential candidates in the 2000-2008 period, and a strong increase in the 2008-2016 period. The [study](#) concludes that the net result of these political changes is that although more ideologically extreme members of both parties gain office, only the Republicans were able to gain more seats as a consequence of trade shocks.

Another highly influential paper analyzed the political impact of import exposure in 15 Western European regions from 1988 to 2007. Based on the Comparative Manifesto Project Database, the authors created a novel measure of the ideological orientation of each party. Their results show that the import shock in the period investigated fueled the support of the protectionist right but not of the protectionist left and led to a decline in the support for the pro-trade left. To assess the magnitude of their effect they calculated that a one-standard-deviation increase in the Chinese import shock led to a 1.7-percentage-point increase in the support for the radical right. This effect is substantial. The [average radical-right vote share](#) was 5% in Western Europe between 1988 and 2007, implying that one-third of the populist radical right's votes were attributable to the import shock in Western Europe.

The same holds for the Brexit referendum in 2016. The "Leave" share of the vote was systematically higher in regions more exposed to the Chinese import shock. The import shock again explained around one-third of the Leave vote directly, and it also led to an [increase](#) in anti-immigration attitudes.

Labor market turmoil, such as increasing unemployment and job uncertainty, is also among the chief causes of populism. A highly-cited [study](#) showed that a 1-percentage-point increase in the unemployment rate during the Great Recession led to an increase in votes for populist parties by 2 to 4 percentage points across Europe. Again, the evidence suggests that unemployment also fueled cultural expressions of populism, such as political distrust and anti-immigration attitudes.

These labor-market uncertainties catalyze populism even in countries with strong welfare states, such as Sweden. A study found that the number of layoff notices received by low-skilled workers explained 31% of the total [increase](#) in votes for the radical-right Sweden Democrats between 2007 and 2010.

Technological advancement is another form of economic shock. Low-skilled workers whose jobs are easier to automate are [losing out](#) to digitalization and robotization. A study found that industrial robot adoption led to a 2.8-percentage-point increase in the probability of voting for a radical-right party in Europe in the 1999–2015 period. This effect is again large, since the baseline [probability of voting](#) for a radical right party in this period in the countries being analyzed in the study was 4.8%. Like other forms of uncertainty, robotization also increases nativism, status threat, and cultural traditionalism.

Low-wage countries are often considered winners of industries' relocations from high-income countries; thus, import exposure and robotization likely play a minor role in populism in these countries. East-Central Europe is home to archetypical foreign-investment-driven export economies relying on comparatively cheap labor.² However, this does not mean that the region does not experience the [negative consequences](#) of domestic disintegration as its countries integrate into the global economy. Researchers just have to look at other processes than robotization or import exposure.

The foreign currency debt shock in Hungary is a great example. By 2008, more than 60% of household debt in Hungary was denominated in Swiss francs. Because of the financial crisis between September 2008 and the election held in April 2010, the exchange rate for the Hungarian forint against the Swiss franc depreciated by 23%. This depreciation led to a rapid, unexpected increase in household indebtedness. This foreign currency debt shock [increased](#) the vote share of the far-right Jobbik party by five percentage points on average, representing 35% of the total increase in the far-right vote share from 2006 to 2010 in Hungary.

Finally, austerity also has significant disruptive potential for fueling the rise of populism. For example, people exposed to welfare cuts were more likely to support the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and support the Leave campaign in 2016. A [study](#) found that UKIP vote shares increased by between 3.5 and 11.9 percentage points due to austerity.

² East-Central Europe is the region between German-, Hungarian-, and West Slavic-speaking Europe and the East Slavic countries of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine.

“Leave” support in 2016 would have been at least six percentage points lower without austerity, thus leaving the UK within the European Union.

How Does Demand Driven by Economic Shocks Interact with Political Supply?

In contrast to austerity, redistribution [dampens](#) voters’ enthusiasm for populism. At the same time, institutional arrangements that prevent governments from protecting social cohesion in hard times [magnify](#) the effect of economic insecurity on populism. The rise of economic insecurity and populism are thus not natural laws inherent to globalization. They are consequences of policy choices. Redistributive policies can reduce economic insecurity and take the wind out of populists’ sails. As one [study](#) concluded, “if one wants to defeat populism, one must first defeat economic insecurity.”

Changes in political supply influence how economic insecurity translates into political outcomes. For example, once the Five Star Movement appeared in Italy, it successfully attracted the votes of trade victims previously channeled by radical-right parties. Thus, when presented with an alternative, victims of trade shocks [do not necessarily choose](#) a radical-right populist party.

The U.S. offers an opposite example. Here, Democrats had benefited from the discontent of trade victims during the presidential elections before 2012, with 2012 being something of a wash between the two, a turning point. However, since 2012, Republicans have since become [more successful](#) in attracting the victims of trade shocks, leading to Trump’s 2016 victory. Center-left parties are particularly vulnerable to moving toward the right in economic policy; their voters [might leave them](#), become passive, or turn to radical alternatives.

Voters’ ideological orientation might differ from their actual voting behavior. There is [causal evidence](#) that economic insecurity induced a slight leftward shift in ideological orientation among trade victims in Europe. However, they were more likely to vote for radical-right parties than voters not exposed to import competition. Trade victims might embrace anti-liberal right-populist political views due to political supply-side effects stemming from radical-right populists. In other words, a significant part of the radical-right voting bloc is not made up simply of committed racists, but includes those who would be open to a left-wing alternative to centrist liberalism if it existed. If such an option does not exist, these voters drift to the populist right.

This finding is in line with qualitative research on the cultural political economy of the globalization backlash. If progressive cultural identities are legitimately available, victims of globalization can use them to [build political identities](#) centered on solidarity. However, if such codes lose legitimacy, nationalism might emerge as an exclusionary solidarity community, filling the void left behind by the retreat of class-based progressive solidarity identities (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Does Economic Insecurity Fuel the Cultural Backlash?

There is robust evidence that the cultural backlash is not an alternative mechanism but a mediator. Robotization [increases](#) nativism, status threat, and cultural traditionalism in Europe. Unemployment leads to political distrust.³ Import exposure in the U.S. [increases](#) the popularity of conservative media and conservative viewpoints and catalyzes the cultural backlash, which favors the success of the populist right. A social-psychological experimental survey showed that economic decline induces cultural discontent mediated by economic anger. Cultural discontent, in turn, [catalyzes](#) populism.

Crucially, there is also [strong evidence](#) that economic insecurity leads to a shift towards anti-liberal values in the domain of politics, but not in the extra-political domain such as child-rearing. This result implies that the populist backlash is neither a result of a persistent authoritarian outlook (“dysfunctional working-class culture”) nor an expression of a general shift in the direction of the authoritarian personality. Instead, the skepticism towards liberal values and liberal democracy is a political manifestation of distress driven by economic insecurity.

Some voters [interpret economic grievances](#) primarily concerned with their group’s status and not their individual self-interest. This is in line with the argument that culture-war-type political preferences are indirect reflections of economic shocks. At the same time, some [studies](#) identified a robust causal role of real suffering behind populism, such as declining life expectancy. This suggests that economic insecurity and individual material interests also directly affect populism.

Conclusions

This systematic review of the causal evidence of the role of economic insecurity behind populism showed undeniably strong evidence for the independent causal role of economic shocks in the populist backlash.

³ Andrea Cerrato, Federico Maria Ferrara, and Francesco Ruggieri, “Why Does Import Competition Favor Republicans?” (unpublished manuscript, September 30, 2018), available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3147169>.

Furthermore, many studies found that the cultural backlash itself is an expression of economic grievances. Several papers highlighted that policies and political supply factors influence if and how these economic shocks get translated into populist politics. Populism scholars cannot ignore the robust causal evidence on the disruptive political effects of economic insecurity and claim that economic factors play no role in populism.

It is also essential to recognize that economic shocks might affect people through several contextual and individual channels. Income loss is only one of them. Thus, studies that show little or no association between individuals' position in the social distribution of incomes and populism should not be interpreted as evidence that economic grievances do not matter. Economic shocks lead to the destruction of communities, growing inequalities, the outmigration of the young and capable, and rising labor market uncertainty; these processes adversely affect whole neighborhoods (see [here](#), and [here](#)).⁴ Living in such areas might catalyze populism even among those who do not lose their jobs or suffer income loss. Researchers need fine-grained tools to capture the effect of such economic shocks beyond the most widely used survey instruments.

Some voters are driven to populism solely because of cultural concerns or ingrained racism. However, a more diverse group of dissatisfied voters behind the recent surge of populism is primarily motivated by economic insecurity. The victims of economic shocks and those suffering from economic insecurity go beyond the poorest and most disadvantaged, encompassing a large part of what is often considered the middle class both in the U.S. and Europe (see [here](#) and [here](#)). The success of far-right parties depends on their ability to mobilize a coalition of core base voters with cultural grievances and the often larger group of voters with economic grievances (see [here](#) and [here](#)). This implies that the strict dualism pervading the literature that juxtaposes interest-based economic determinants and symbolic cultural factors is not fruitful.

Policy choices and political supply [influence](#) voters' reactions to economic dislocations. In the absence of left-wing, progressive policies and narratives, radical-right populists can mobilize dissent by fanning the flames of the culture war, using the nation as an imagined solidarity community that purports to protect against globalization. Right-wing populists make economic issues appear to be cultural ones. As a political supply-side tool, culture and identity are the dominant tropes of populism. But on the demand side, economic insecurity plays a critical role beyond the core group

⁴ Anne-Marie Jeannet and Chiara Allegri, "Has Regional Deindustrialization Decreased People's Satisfaction with Democracy?" (Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics Annual Conference, July 20, 2020).

of committed racists and bigots. The cultural backlash is not a fully independent mechanism but, in part, a result of economic dislocations. In short, the headlines might be about race, religion, or nation, but the subtext is often about unaddressed issues of class (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Research should go beyond the strict juxtaposition of culture versus the economy and focus instead on the lived experiences of economic insecurity and the co-evolution of cultural-symbolic and economic factors. To beat right-wing populism, politicians and policymakers need to learn from the emerging evidence reviewed in this study. Instead of trying to take the wind out of radical-right populists' sails by diluting left-wing platforms with chauvinism, social democrats should address economic insecurity. The existing evidence suggests that they could achieve this by offering new forms of redistribution and a progressive narrative identity to reintegrate the victims of economic shocks into mainstream politics.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1. Overview of the causal evidence on economic insecurity and populism

Study	Setting	Outcome & operationalization	Treatment	Design	Summary of results
Ahlquist et al. (2020)	Poland, 2015	Populist radical right; Vote choice; Binary	Foreign currency debt shock	Survey experiment; Matching;	Individuals exposed to the 2015 surprise revaluation of the Swiss franc were more likely to demand government support and more likely to vote for the largest opposition party, the national-populist PiS.
Albanese et al. (2022)	Italy, 2008–2013	Populist radical right & Left; Political orientation; Score	Redistribution	Reg. discount.; Instrumental 1 variable	Higher EU financing in the 2008–2012 period led to lower support for populist parties in the 2013 general election.
Algan et al. (2017)	European Union, 2000–2016	Populist radical right & left; Vote share; Change	Labor market uncertainty	Instrumental 1 variable; Diff-in-diff	There is a strong relationship between increases in unemployment and voting for non-mainstream parties, especially populist ones.
Anelli et al. (2021)	Western Europe, 1999–2015	Populist radical right; Vote choice; Binary	Automation	Instrumental 1 variable	Individuals exposed to automation display higher support for the radical right, independently of cultural factors. Automation also increases nativism, status threat, and cultural traditionalism.
Autor et al. (2020)	US, 2000–2016	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Import exposure	Instrumental 1 variable	Import exposure increased the campaign contributions by more ideologically extreme donors, the popularity of conservative media, conservative viewpoints, Republican nominees after 2010, and Trump in 2016.
Baccini and Sattler (2021)	Western Europe, 1991–2018	Populist Radical Right & Left; Political orientation; Score	Austerity	Difference-in-Differences	Austerity increases support for radical-right populism in economically vulnerable regions. Furthermore, it catalyzes a cultural backlash: negative attitudes against migrants and minorities, higher support for conservative values.

Baccini and Weymout h (2021)	US, 2004–2016	Populist Radical Right; Vote share; Change	Labor market uncertainty	Instrumental variable	White manufacturing layoffs led to a decline in the Clinton vote and an increase in the Trump vote, while Non-White manufacturing layoffs had the opposite effect during the 2016 Presidential election.
Barone and Kreuter (2021)	Italy, 1992–2013	Populist radical right & left; Vote share; Change	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Trade globalization increased support for populist parties and invalid votes, and abstentionism. Redistribution mitigated the political consequences of the trade shock because it alleviated economic distress.
Barros and Santos Silva (2019)	Brazil, 2014–2018	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Labor market uncertainty	Instrumental variable	Male-specific labor market shocks increase support for Pres. Jair Bolsonaro, while female-specific shocks have the opposite effect.
Caprettini et al. (2021)	Italy, 1946–1992	Populist radical left; Vote share; Change	Redistribution	Reg. discont.; Instrumental variable	The large-scale land redistribution led to persistent electoral benefits for the Christian Democrats (DC), the party that promoted the reform, and persistent electoral losses for the Communist Party (PCI).
Caselli et al. (2020)	Italy, 1994–2008	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Exposure to import competition from China has positively contributed to the electoral outcomes of far-right parties.
Caselli et al. (2021)	Italy, 2001–2013	Populist radical right & Left; Vote share; Change	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Import exposure, robotization, and immigration increased the votes for far-right parties between 2001 and 2008. After 2008, only robotization had such an impact, while immigration increased the votes for the 5 Star Movement.
Cavaille and Ferwerda (2022)	Austria, 2002–2006	Populist Radical Right; Vote share; Change	Housing demand shock	Difference-in-Differences	Municipalities most exposed to public housing congestion induced by the extension of public housing benefits to non-EU residents led to a significant increase in radical right votes.

Chen (2020)	US, 2006–2014	Populist radical right & Left; Vote share; Level	Labor market uncertainty	Diff-in-diff; Matching	Unemployment during the Great Recession increased distrust in companies, the preference for redistribution, and voting for Sanders in primaries. Immigrant influx increased anti-immigration attitudes and voting for Trump.
Colantone and Stanig (2018a)	Western Europe, 1988–2007	Populist radical right; Political orientation; Score	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	A stronger import shock leads to (1) an increase in support for nationalist and isolationist parties, (2) an increase in support for radical-right parties, and (3) a general shift to the right in the electorate.
Colantone and Stanig (2018b)	Western Europe, 1988–2008	Populist attitudes; Political orientation; Score	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Import shocks lead to less democratic and liberal, and more authoritarian, attitudes. People in regions with stronger import shocks are more concerned with the “cultural threat” posed by immigrants.
Colantone and Stanig (2018c)	UK, 1990–2007	Populist radical right; Vote share; Level	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	The “Leave” share in the Brexit referendum was systematically higher in regions more exposed to the Chinese import shock. Import exposure also led to an increase in anti-immigration attitudes.
Crescenzi et al. (2020)	UK, 2016	Populist radical right; Vote share; Level	Redistribution	Regression discontinuity	Citizens living in areas eligible for the highest amount of EU Structural Funds and experiencing improvements in their labor market were more inclined to express a pro-Europe (“Remain”) vote in the referendum on Brexit.
Dehdari (2022)	Sweden, 2006–2010	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Labor market uncertainty	Instrumental variable	The study finds that one layoff notice among low-skilled native-born workers increases, on average, support for the Swedish radical-right party, the Sweden Democrats, by 0.17–0.45 votes.

Dippel et al. (2021)	Germany, 1987–2009	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Exposure to imports from low-wage countries increased the support for the far-right between 1987 and 2009. Low-skilled manufacturing workers were the most affected. There is no robust association with the far-left vote shares.
Doerr et al. (2022)	Germany, 1930–1932	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Bank failure	Diff-in-diff; Matching	Danat Bank’s failure (targeted by anti-Jewish propaganda) led to declining incomes & increased Nazi votes. Dresdner Bank’s failure (no Nazi propaganda) had similar income effect but no increase in Nazi votes.
Ferrera (2022)	US, 2008–2016	Populist radical right; Political orientation; Score	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Voters living in districts more exposed to Chinese imports are more likely to favor racial and religious in-groups (Whites and Christians) against ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, and vote for the Republican Presidential candidate.
Fervers (2019)	Germany, 2003	Populist radical right & left; Vote choice; Binary	Austerity	Regression discontinuity	The Harz IV reforms led to decreasing satisfaction with democracy and political participation, as well as increasing support for non-established right-wing parties and non-established left-wing parties less robustly.
Fetzer (2019)	UK, 2000–2016	Populist radical right; Vote share; Multiple	Austerity	Diff-in-diff; Event study	Electoral district and individual-level results suggest that those exposed to welfare cuts experienced large and precisely estimated increases in their tendency to express support for UKIP and support “Leave” in the 2016 Brexit referendum.
Fetzer et al. (2022)	UK, 2008–2016	Populist radical right; Vote share; Level	Austerity	Diff-in-diff; Matching	Housing benefits cut led to an affordability shock and significant housing insecurities. It also decreased the registration and turnout in the 2016 EU referendum and increased the support for “Leave.”

Frey et al. (2018)	US, 2011–2015	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Automation	Instrumental variable	Victims of the robot revolution have a higher propensity to opt for radical political change: electoral districts with higher exposure to robots were significantly more likely to support Trump.
Galofré-Vilà et al. (2021)	Germany, 1930–1933	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Austerity	Instrumental variable; Reg. discontinuity	Areas more affected by austerity had higher Nazi vote shares. Most of the effect of austerity is driven by health and housing expenditure cuts. Mortality is a significant mediator of the effect of austerity on Nazi Party support.
Gozgor (2021)	European Union, 1980–2020	Populist radical right & left; Vote share; Change	Labor market uncertainty	Instrumental variable	Higher economic uncertainty measured by the World Uncertainty Index increases support for total populism, right-wing populism, and left-wing populism to a smaller degree.
Guiso et al. (2019)	European Union, 2000–14	Populist radical right; Vote share; Level	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Import exposure and the financial crisis have boosted populism in Eurozone (EZ) countries but not in non-EZ countries. The policy straitjacket imposed by the EZ increases economic insecurity, which fuels populism.
Gyongyosi and Verner (2022)	Hungary, 1998–2014	Populist radical right; Vote share; Multiple	Foreign currency debt shock	Instrumental variable; Diff-in-diff	Household debt increase due to the foreign currency exchange rate shock was a significant cause behind the electoral success of the radical-right Jobbik party in Hungary in 2010.
Lechler (2019)	European Union, 1994–2014	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Labor market uncertainty	Instrumental variable	Declining employment increases Eurosceptic voting. This effect is particularly strong for unemployed and low-skilled workers in regions with a high share of migrants from other EU member states.
Lin and Xi (2022)	European Union, 2010–2014	Populist Radical Right; Vote share; Change	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Exposure to the import shock from developing countries increases the support for right-wing parties and economically far right parties, but decreases the support for culturally far right parties.

Malgouyres (2017)	France, 1995–2012	Populist radical right; Vote share; Change	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Industrial decline generated by import exposure increases far-right vote share. The effect increased over time, benefitting the far-right mainly during the period from 2007–2012.
Milner (2021)	Western Europe, 1990–2018	Populist radical right & left; Vote share; Level	Import exposure	Instrumental variable	Import exposure and automation are associated with growing vote shares for extreme right parties. The financial crisis enhanced support for populist right parties and eroded support for mainstream left parties.
Rhodes-Purdy et al. (2021)	US, 2020	Populist attitudes; Political orientation; Score	Subjective economic hardship	Survey experiment	Negative economic priming induced cultural discontent. Anger mediates the effect of economic decline on cultural discontent. Cultural discontent, in turn, catalyzes populism.
Siedler (2011)	Germany, 1990–2004	Populist radical right; Vote choice; Change	Labor market uncertainty	Sibling differences	Parental unemployment during late childhood has a significant positive effect on right-wing party affinity later in life.

II.
THE ROLE OF
ACADEMIA IN
CULTURE WARS

BACKLASH: NORMATIVE BIASES AND HEGEMONIC FIGHTS IN PROGRESSIVE ACADEMIA

by Eszter Kováts

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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 U.S. 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.

ACADEMIA AND POLITICS – ENTANGLED, YET NOT THE SAME

by Sarah Speck and Paula-Irene Villa

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The COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the increasingly prominent LGBTIQ* movements as well as growing political incentives for professionalized academic outreach have intensified debates on relations between academia and the public—raising, in turn, (once more) the question of the relation between academia and politics. These debates take place in very different contexts and, thus, political constellations and are perhaps more explosive in the United States at present than in the German context from which we argue here, although they are fiercely contested there as well. But as important and revealing as it is to shed light on the respective discourse constellations and sometimes severe consequences—think, for example, of the banning of certain socio-critical study material—we will focus on one aspect in the following paper. The point of departure is the accusation, appearing in many of these debates and contexts, that gender studies is an example of an (excessively/inappropriately/dangerously) politicized scientific discipline.

This argument is raised partly by actors seeking to vilify gender studies and the politics of equity (e.g., [Hark and Villa 2015](#); [Kuhar and Paternotte 2018](#); [Graff, Kapur and Walters 2019](#)) and partly from within academia (notably [Hirschauer 2003](#)). The later approach criticizes gender studies for conceiving of itself too emphatically as political *praxis* and ignoring the difference between politics and scholarship. We think it worthwhile to revisit this question—not least in order to discuss the ambivalences that likewise are as old as the field itself. Instead of erasing ambiguity, which would be both epistemologically and empirically untenable, we argue in favor of a reflexive approach to ambivalences as complex relations of mediation. We also argue in favor of keeping these conflicts genealogically visible rather than perpetuating simple narratives of progress or decline. This also helps avoid the crude either/or rhetoric currently dominating public discourse. While we uphold a distinction between political and academic practice—with regard to both generating knowledge and communicating knowledge—we argue in favor of a complex, if not dialectical view of both areas of knowledge production and their relatedness. This view seeks to avoid naively scientific attitudes that ignore

the situatedness of knowledge and science as well as its ethical and political responsibility and thereby lapse into ideology.

No less problematic, on the other hand, is the conflation of politics and scholarship, however progressive or well-intended these may be. We see this, for instance, when instructors or students fail to distinguish between a university seminar and an activist training session, with reading lists guided solely by political preference, or when research unhesitatingly adopts questions and categories from an activist agenda. A differentiated perspective would also have to consider the mutual entanglement of both logics and modes, political and academic. For research is always and inevitably itself a form of practice, one that is politically significant, historically conditioned, and enacted in settings of institutional power. If, therefore, any boundary is to be drawn, the meaning of *academic* on the one hand and *political* on the other requires illumination.

Ideal and Illusion of Scientific Freedom

In modernity, science is associated with the (never-uncontested) claim to do nothing but generate knowledge—not knowledge *for* extraneous purposes but knowledge *in and of itself* ([Luhmann 1970](#); [Schimank 2012](#); [Stichweh 1988](#)). This ideal type of its form and function is most closely realized in what we call *basic research*: a kind of methodically controlled reflection, critique, observation, interrogation, reconstruction, discovery, and analysis of all aspects of the world—and one that can consider itself free from practical considerations and necessities save for those relating to the practice of research itself. That science, understood thus, should be fully “free” from any other concern is actually a regulative ideal or “real fiction”: a powerful and effective idea, a norm that guides practice and is legally enshrined. Another such real fiction is the idea of a purely meritocratic recruitment process—an *ideal* that is necessary and effective, albeit unattainable given social conditions as they are ([McNamee and Miller 2004](#)). The notion that science really—empirically and factually—*did* operate in such a manner is what we would call “scientism,” meaning a doxical attitude towards science ([Bourdieu 1972](#)), a faith cloaking itself in the mantle of self-evident knowledge, an ideology as understood by Marx and Mannheim ([Marx 2016/1845-46](#); [Mannheim 2005/1929](#)).

Particularly in their feminist variants, women’s and gender studies have contributed much to critical reflection on these fictions, including that of the scientist’s supposedly general, universal, and objective position as having no bearing on the research process ([Crasnow 2020](#) for a broad overview; [Schiebinger 1991](#) for one specific case study). Gender studies has emphasized, and its research has shown, that this position is in fact highly specific and reflective of a particular perspective. Science is practiced by

people who are socially situated ([Harding 2004](#); [Intemann 2010](#)), resulting in (more or less) systematic imbalances, biases, and blind spots in research. Empirical analyses of the conditions under which scientific knowledge is produced have shown that the position of the ideal-typical scientist—in its historical concretion, a male, white, middle-class, heterosexual with no physical (or social) disabilities—is free from practical considerations and necessities only because certain tasks (care, family, physical labor, etc.) are taken over by others. Research also draws on experiences of absence, reflected for instance in the social sciences' understanding of “work,” which often was and continues to be reduced to paid employment in the marketplace generating surplus value, rendering—gendered—care work invisible ([Tancred 1995](#)).

Power and Positionality

The second argument, formulated in gender studies and other research contexts as well as by such canonical authors as Marx ([1971/1859](#)), Horkheimer ([1988/37](#)), and Bourdieu ([2000](#)), is a critique of the idea of an (as it were) “pure” knowledge production, of science as pursuing “neutral” and “objective” research unfettered by normative or political interests. By contrast, empirical studies and theoretical analyses have shown science to be enmeshed in power games and structures, which have a complex part in shaping and conditioning (but not crudely determining) the content of scholarship, resources, and their distribution, cultures, organizations, and practices. The productive conclusion is that science must confront its own enmeshing by means of methodically controlled (self-) reflexivity. This is at the core, for instance, of Haraway's or Harding's understanding of a better or “strong(er) objectivity” ([Haraway 1988](#); [Harding 2005](#)). Gender studies repeatedly challenges this (self-) reflexivity and develops it through debates, for instance by critically interrogating and expanding concepts and methods, and by demanding greater complexity within the category of “gender,” from the perspective of queer, trans,* and Black studies, from intersectional, decolonial, and/or critical race perspectives (see e.g., [Hill-Collins 1994](#); [Hark 2005](#); [Lutz et al. 2011](#); [Essed et al. 2017](#); [Tudor 2021](#)). However, this claim and this programmatic (self-) reflexivity—alongside the necessity of declaring one's own interests and motivations—are hallmarks of the entire critical tradition in theory, not only of the constellations cited here. Yet none of this means that it surrenders its claim to be science and as such to contribute to human knowledge and indeed to “finding the truth”—on the contrary.

Reflecting on what Mannheim called the *Seinsgebundenheit* of knowledge ([Mannheim 2005/1929](#))—the connection between thought and the conditions of its existence—naturally includes an understanding of political processes in academia, with all its conflicts over working conditions and

relations, resources, structures of exploitation, hierarchies, dependencies, and exclusionary mechanisms. The very question of who may legitimately claim the subject position here, who merits recognition as a scientist, is crucial and remains so to this day to the extent that “modernity” remains structured along racial, gendered, and (post- or neo-) colonial lines. “Others” are made to feel as outsiders every day, marked as The Woman, The Gay Person, The Black Person, etc.—and outsiders are presumed to be less capable of embodying knowledge, the discipline, science, *generality*. A female professor tends to be addressed as a woman—a male one as a professor. Books written by female authors tend to be filed under “women’s literature,” those by men simply as “literature” ([Showalter 1999](#))—unless these men are non-white or non-heterosexual, in which case they too may be filed under a specific and particularizing label and have doubt cast on their ability to stand for the general.

This ideological generalization of a specific position on the one hand and the marking of other positions as specific on the other hand is part of the cultural and normative texture of modernity, one that is constitutive of modernity’s normative and cultural fabric. Obviously, this also plays out at the concrete level of positions and resources. Of course, questions of power and also of exclusion are inherent in the field. Academia is not the province of grassroots democracy, nor ought it to be: not everybody is “able” to participate or even cares to. What is decisive, however, is what power and hierarchy in the scientific field are built on, how inclusion and exclusion are legitimized. Yet debates over the very structure of the field—who receives a degree and fills what position (and who does not), and indeed the very definition of “merit,” of quality and excellence—are not “merely” political, but go to the very heart of science. The same is true of debates over curricula, the scientific canon, the remit of professorships—debates, in brief, over matters of content. Here too gender studies has significant knowledge to contribute, the field itself having arisen from the women’s movement and hence only as a result of political struggles ([Brand and Sabisch 2018](#); [Metz-Göckel 1987](#)). In all these respects science must be understood as a political arena—or, to put it another way, its institutionalization and the (re-)structuring of its internal mechanisms must be understood as an ongoing process of political contestation.

Scientific Knowledge and Politics – Different Logics . . .

Yet—and here we come to the core of our argument— fields, science and politics follow different logics and are regulated by different ideals (e.g., [Weber 1922/1904](#); [Rademacher and Wernet 2015](#)). Following Luhmann, for instance, politics might be defined as a social logic geared towards reaching collectively binding decisions with and for others ([Luhmann 2002](#)). Science, on the other hand, Luhmann finds to be concerned with

“truth” (undoubtedly a complicated concept) and the exclusion of “untruth” ([Luhmann 1970](#) and [2018](#)). This requires the existence of a set of procedures for challenging truth claims and for (self-) reflection. Science, in another definition, obeys a logic of *differentiation*. In politics, by contrast, (too much) differentiation and self-reflection can have a paralyzing effect: politics seeks to arrive at decisions and thus tends to overlook differences in pursuit of common ground, just as its focus on power leads it to form alliances. Though science and politics (e.g., in the form of social movements) may refer to one another—the climate movement being an obvious example—they remain separate. Though feminist movements and feminist research and theory may share the same goal—e.g., “to overcome gendered domination and inequality” ([Becker-Schmidt and Knapp 2000](#))—they differ in their immediate practical concerns. Political movements must aim to be in a position to act, to create solidarity around shared concerns, to forge alliances across different situations, to create opportunities for intervention and involvement in the political sphere.

Science, by contrast, is concerned first and foremost with analysis and gaining knowledge, with arriving at truths or insights that may be politically unwelcome or unsettling, particularly when it comes to understanding how “the world”—society, power, or inequality—works in the first place. This may in turn lead to new insights that *may* be politically relevant. Understanding the mechanisms of social reproduction is a tool that makes it possible to change them through political *praxis*. Yet this invariably raises questions of translation. Science, in raising questions of complexity, contingency, and context, should not be under any illusion that it can intervene directly in politics. Scientific and political speech belong to different genres, their respective terms and concepts operate in different modes and sometimes in a dialectic relatedness. Judith Butler made a similar point in an interview stating that “feminism needs women, but it need not know who they are” (Butler 1993). This headline points to the way two logics—that of politics and that of research, of knowledge—relate to one another in tension and mutual recognition. Politically relevant categories, though they may be politically necessary, should not be thought of as able to bear the full empirical and conceptual truth of the matter—nor, by the same token, does questioning these categories spell the end of politics.

... yet Entangled

Two aspects, however, strike us as important in our reflection on the relation between academia and politics. First, though we maintain the distinction between these logics, we are no less aware of their entanglement, particularly in a field of critical studies whose knowledge interest is normative and even political (acknowledging that all research and researchers are somehow socially and politically situated). Critical science

and theory take their bearings from people's suffering ([Adorno 1966](#): 27), from empirical problems, from political conflicts. And their thriving to emancipation, justice, equality, human rights, peace, or the end of violence no doubt affects not only research questions but also methodological, conceptual, and theoretical choices. But if it is to remain "good" research, these dimensions must be and remain open and free from considerations of the all-too-immediate political utility ([Flick and Hoppe 2021](#)). Of course, this applies equally to the result, which ought not only or even chiefly to follow activist categories and hence be more or less known in advance. Once subsumed to politics, research undermines itself. Research processes should not give up their primary claim, that of producing knowledge. Critical reflection (on methods and categories) is compatible with a normative and even political knowledge interest, and it requires an acknowledgement of both the difference and the entanglement between politics and science rather than their conflation. For the research process, this also means not narrowing one's own field of vision to coincide with a particular political perspective—for instance, not to disguise considerations of political utility as matters of knowledge. From a scientific perspective, the key question is not "What is to be done?" but rather "How does the object of our political interest work?". Such analyses may then contribute to answering how, for instance, gendered injustice, lack of recognition, exclusion, exploitation, disenfranchisement, and power might be overcome. And Critical Theory and science understand that the possibility of change only lies in political action ([Marx 2011/1886](#)).

And, of course, scientists contribute to politics in one form or another, as they always have done and will continue to do, whether as activists in social movements and/or as engaged intellectuals intervening in public debates on the basis of their research: as epidemiologists on public health, as meteorologists on climate change, as physicians on reproductive rights, as sociologists on feminism, as psychiatrists on transgender* rights, as historians on peace, etc. However, they—i.e., we—should be aware that this means thinking in a different, a political mode and hence speaking and writing in different genres, producing essays and manifestos, for instance. Ideally, this also includes permanent reflection on one's own position of power, deriving from the social position of science, free from practical obligations—the magic mediating word here is *expertise*. Many critical scientists alternate between these modes while eliding the difference. And for some, their conflation comes not from a lack of reflection, but due to the manner in which social positioning within academia is conditioned by power—e.g., as female, as racialized, as "disabled," and/or as queer researchers affected by devaluation and particularization. When these researchers speak *scientifically*, they are almost always understood *politically*. And in a certain way their scientific speech *is* a political act because their

scientific analyses are considered incomplete, subjective, lacking “impartiality,” or otherwise questionable. These intersectional positionings cannot be played off against one another, and to disregard them is itself a political act, one born of privilege. To raise this issue in the current climate is to incur the charge of “identity politics” and thereby risk being caricatured and having one’s scientific and professional standing called into question. It is worth noting that this matter is currently the subject of intense discussion, not least in the German-speaking world—particularly in digital media, where journalism, academia, politics, civil society, and those directly concerned connect, talk, and debate the form and (non-)sense of “researchers as public intellectuals or politicians.” Ciphers such as “cancel culture” ([Daub 2022](#)), “identity politics” ([Walters 2018](#)), or “wokeism” are part of these debates. We suspect that these debates are a symptom of the ever-precarious and hence virulent question concerning the boundaries between the functional systems of modern societies and their inevitable mutual referentiality.

Political and Academic Standpoints

Second, this emphasis on the different modes of knowledge production in politics and activism on the one hand and science on the other should not be taken to mean social movements and political practice were incapable of producing statements with a claim to truth. On the contrary, social movements have produced so many insightful texts and a great deal of activist research has proved highly illuminating (among many others, [Combahee River Collective 1977](#); [Precarias a la deriva 2011](#); [Cavallero and Gago 2021](#); [Gago 2020](#)). With regard to gender studies in particular, there can be no doubt that it owes many key insights and productive stimuli, even its roots, to feminist, queer, and other social movements. An emphasis on the complexity of female lives and life-worlds, a critique of a position of supposedly homogenous female subjectivity (e.g., [Davis 1972](#); [Flax 2004](#); [Butler 2006](#); etc.), critiques of identity ([Hark 2005](#); [Hieber and Villa 2007](#)), and intersectional thought ([Crenshaw 1989](#); [Lutz 2015](#)) emerged from largely political dynamics ([Shapiro 1996](#); [McDuffie 2011](#)).

Thus, in gender studies, academic and movement-political forces are interwoven in the process of theory formation to a degree that makes a separation between science and politics seem hopeless at first sight—all the more so, many would argue, because challenging epistemological considerations are involved, for instance the question of “epistemic privileges” ([McAfee 2018](#)). Different theorists have argued that those who have the most to say about discriminating mechanisms are those most affected by them, bearing in mind that, according to black, feminist, and black feminist standpoint theories from [W.E.B. Du Bois](#) (2007) and [Harding \(1987\)](#) to Hill-Collins ([1986](#), [1989](#)), the subordinates arrive at

knowledge not automatically, but by (collective) political practice and reflection. Those who experience power in their own bodies have a very precise and indeed bodily understanding of social structures that is never fully accessible to those who do not share these experiences. There is much to be said for this argument, but it should not be misunderstood as favoring an epistemology based purely on personal experience or partisanship. Instead, what it argues for is the necessity of taking seriously all experiences and translating them into knowledge interest.

On the other hand, there is the no-less-plausible argument that scientists' epistemically privileged position is the result of its being endowed free from practical considerations and necessities and gifted with resources in the form of time, (acquired) knowledge, methods, and experience in reflection on "the world." At the same time, this position potentially entails blindness to many forms of suffering and to the lack of these very resources. Privilege can block the relational insight into the dependence of one's own epistemic position on the exploitation of others and on systemic injustices. The fact that science is (to a degree) free from practical considerations and necessities is both its resource and its Achilles' heel. Those whose daily life is not free from such practical considerations, who have to deal very concretely with the burden of an exploitative, unjust, and violent world, therefore sometimes know more and in any case something different about the world we all share and understand only in pre-structured segments. These segments also condition research, both enabling and constraining it.

The Core of Reflexivity

What this means, in our opinion, is that neither the position of the "subaltern," or "dominated," nor that of the "scientist" signifies privileged access to the world. What counts is a dynamic, questioning, knowledge-seeking reflexive attitude and approach—towards that which one seeks to understand, towards others who may be affected by the world in different ways, but also towards oneself and one's own social position. This is where "positional fundamentalism" ([Villa 2017](#) and [2020](#)) falls short, meaning a short-circuiting of positioning and standpoint, the equation of social position with an epistemological or substantial stance. We encounter this both in activist and in academic contexts. It is wrong, for instance, to claim that educationally privileged, heterosexual, white women per se had nothing to say about the realities of life as a proletarian Black lesbian. Yet it requires a highly reflexive and (self-) critical approach and a profound attempt at understanding the people whose lives are being discussed. This must include recognition and listening carefully and empathetically in an attitude of knowledge-oriented openness.

We are convinced that such a reflexive attitude can generate understanding in the sense of objective, situated knowledge ([Haraway 1988](#)) not only in the field of science but also within political movements. The possibility of an insight into prevailing circumstances emerges from collective processes and from jointly created structures of exchange and reflection. It requires work, it is often riven with tension and conflict, and it is always provisional. What, then, lies at the root of our insistence on the difference between politics and science? The peculiarity of scientific knowledge production resides in the institutionalization of intersubjective knowledge production. The historical genesis of the scientific field entailed the creation of places and the provision of resources along with the development and constant refinement of techniques by which knowledge can be generated in a methodically controlled fashion. For quantitative as well as for non-standardized, qualitative approaches, this also entails an undertaking to identify and remedy blind spots in interpreting data. Expert audiences represent an intersubjective controlling instance, demanding that research processes be disclosed and contribute to debate within the field and beyond. Processes such as peer review are intended to secure academic and methodical quality, though of course they have limits and produce certain exclusionary and norming effects. Institutionalized processes are by no means free of power, interests, and political overtones. Yet this does not mean that we are willing to abandon the scientific standpoint in favor of a subjectivist or relativist stance equating scientific practice with political content. On the contrary: we must be able to expect science to recognize seriously its socially constituted standpoint, to factor it in, and at the same time to transcend it—and to hold it to this standard.

In Defense of Science—and Politics

Defending the mode of science means defending a space for society's open reflection on itself. This implies that self-knowledge is one of science's crucial tasks. In the current social climate and against the backdrop of debates in which science is exposed to fierce attacks—in the form e.g., of climate denialism, threats to vaccinating physicians, censorship of gender, and critical race research—defending science also means making a stand against “alternative facts” (without falling into a positivist stance) as well as positioning oneself in the struggle for resources. And: we need these resources, for critical research in particular must be free from practical considerations in the sense outlined above. For academic practice, however, defending the scientific standpoint also entails a commitment to openness of outcome. Research that is commissioned, regardless of the actors and political interests involved, is highly problematic—as is the stipulation that research must be “communicated” as a condition for funding. We must avoid falling for a view that measures science by its ability to generate widely understood policies of supposedly common utility. Such criteria are

populist fantasies, though their motivations may be understandable. What we are defending here is science as a place in which society is able to observe itself in all its aspects, including its relations to “nature.”

What is also at stake here—and this idea may make many critical researchers uncomfortable—is the defense of an epistemic standpoint which, in empirical research practice, is founded not least in an asymmetry between researchers and those on or about whom research is conducted. This asymmetry is not tied to the standpoint of the researcher per se but lies in the mode of knowledge production ([Speck 2021](#)). However, this asymmetry in the mode of science, which in certain aspects seems ineradicable and which presents a challenge particularly to participatory research designs ([Bergold and Thomas 2012](#)), also comes with a responsibility: a responsibility not only for the social and political “uses” to which the knowledge gained by research in the natural and social sciences, in technology or the humanities is put, but also to recognize the significance of ethical questions in the context of research itself, because of the potential power in this asymmetry and particularly with regard to questions of privilege and vulnerability ([von Unger 2021](#)). Responsibility also resides in academic teaching, that is to say, in instruction in themes, questions, theories, and methods. Our universities are spaces of learning and communication, though they are structured by an asymmetry between the person(s) grading and evaluating and those who are evaluated and depend on that evaluation. Not to abuse one’s own position of power as a (grading) teacher also means not to mistake the seminar primarily as a site of political mobilization or as a political gathering. This does mean that political matters should be exempt from discussion, it is merely a matter of how to discuss them.

By the same token, it might also be argued that the mode of politics ought to be defended against that of science, for instance in the context of activism. When young feminists are afraid to participate in political processes or raise their voices on political questions because they lack familiarity with the canon of gender studies or have not read or understood Judith Butler, this is a problem. It means that academic power has extended its reach into political debate. And for the very same reason it would be appropriate to take exception to a professor adopting a professorial habitus in an activist context or to criticize activists for seeking to derive academic capital from their political work and the collective knowledge production of many and thereby to improve their own economic position.

For all the proximity and entanglement between gender studies and the (queer/feminist) movement, we believe in the necessity of maintaining the reflexive separation between science and politics, between research and

teaching on the one hand and forging alliances and mobilization on the other, and of reflecting the position and mode of one's own speech, different rules, and existing asymmetries—not least as an aspect of social critique. We should make ourselves aware of what we are doing when and how, what logic we are and ought to be following at any given time. What is called for in both fields of practice is ultimately an ethical attitude, one of openness towards that which we fail to see or understand, of turning towards the voices, experiences, and ways of life with which we are not familiar, and which are too often ignored. What is called for is an attitude that is aware of its own limitations and of the provisional nature of knowledge as well as of the ambivalences and possible paradoxical effects of its own political and/or scientific practice.

THE EDI OPPONENTS OF EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

by Alice Sullivan and Judith Suissa

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The framing of discourse on “cancel culture” in universities often casts student activists in the role of enemies of open, rational discourse. And it is true that students, at least in the U.S. and the UK, have become markedly more censorious in recent years ([Hillman 2022](#); [Haidt and Lukianoff 2018](#)). However, this narrative typically neglects the powerful role played by Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI; often referred to in the U.S. as DEI) structures, which have enabled some staff (both academic and professional) to become activists on the university payroll, with a high level of influence over bureaucratic decision-making. EDI expansionism has been enabled by a longer-term weakening of academic governance and concomitant bureaucratic usurpation of academic prerogatives, including the curriculum ([Ginsberg 2013](#)). This, in turn, is intimately linked to the marketization of the sector.

In this article, we describe a trend for EDI staff and networks in Higher Education to attempt to impose a particular ideological viewpoint, thereby curtailing the scope of fact and opinion that can be expressed within the university. Demographic diversity and viewpoint diversity are distinct goals, and both should be valued by EDI ([Fanshawe 2021](#)). Yet the current trend, we argue, is not only a threat to viewpoint diversity and academic freedom but is also antithetical to serious equalities work that seeks to uphold the rights of all. It is ironic that these threats emanate from people who claim to be promoting equality, diversity and inclusion.

Universities have always contained activists, and many academics successfully combine rigorous scholarship with political activism, with disciplinary expertise and research findings often informing practical change. There may be grey areas between activism and research, but what concerns us here is the relatively recent phenomenon of overreach by university EDI staff and networks who aim to reshape the university in line with a narrow ideological agenda ([Biggs 2018](#)).

Endeavors to widen participation in higher education are a longstanding element of the struggle to create more socially just societies. However, we

suggest that EDI initiatives in the HE sector do not necessarily lead to greater equality and diversity or to inclusion for all. Instead, certain ideas are sanctified by adherents of a particular theoretical position, often at the price of violating existing legal rights. The identitarian politics that sometimes dominate EDI activism often have little to say about economic inequalities, in contrast to a politics rooted in materialist and class analysis ([Reiff 2022](#); [Reid 2022](#)).

Irrespective of one's position in the debate around "the redistribution-recognition dilemma" (see [Fraser 1995](#)), identity is an important category in politics, enabling the understanding of and action against injustice, oppression, and prejudice on the basis of the shared experience of marginalized social groups. Yet contemporary political activism that focuses on collective identities as "dearly-held, self-fashioning, and self-justifying essences" ([Kumar et al. 2018](#)) rather than materially rooted can lead to an impoverished understanding of power ([McNay 2007](#)). The potential for identity claims to legitimate existing privilege is therefore ripe among activists focused on the superficially virtuous goal of acknowledging the claims of identity-based groups. This is even more likely to be the case when the identity in question is claimed not on the basis of material reality—as with feminist demands to recognize women as a sex class—but on the basis of individual, subjective reporting—as with trans activists' demands to recognize as a woman anybody who claims to be a woman. Within this framing, a white male professor can identify as "genderqueer" and hence be treated as a member of an oppressed group.

While EDI departments and officials are charged with overseeing all issues of equality and diversity on campus (including, for example, disability, religion or belief, race, age, and sex), it is frequently the case that [protected characteristics](#) ([Equality Act 2010](#)) other than sexuality and gender reassignment are neglected due to the current dominance, within EDI activism, of activists aligned with a particular ideological position. EDI departments thus often endorse a tacit hierarchy of rights. Not only is gender identity prioritized at the expense of sex, but practical action for staff and students who are materially disadvantaged—for example, to improve access for disabled people or increase the representation of people from working-class backgrounds—is treated as lower priority than demonstrations of allegiance to the LGBTQ+ cause. The associated activism frequently emphasizes performative actions, which can end up silencing and censoring non-compliant voices ([McWhorter 2020](#)).

In the UK, EDI departments typically set up activist LGBTQ+ networks, often at the instigation of lobby group Stonewall ([Sullivan 2022](#)), and consult these groups extensively on policy and practice. These groups are

generally aligned with gender-identity theory, thus excluding staff with lesbian, gay or bisexual orientations who do not subscribe to this ideology while including heterosexual “allies.”

The increasing dominance and politicization of EDI departments within universities is a phenomenon the UK has imported from elite U.S. universities. EDI professionals in administrative roles typically work alongside other university staff who have self-selected into EDI roles for part of their time. Some of these staff are motivated by their desire to promote particular positions in ongoing political campaigns. Here we focus on the way this has played out in the UK context, in the area of sex and gender.

Activists subscribing to gender-identity theory (the view that sex as a category does not exist or does not matter) have taken on significant EDI positions within universities. These activists often combine epistemological relativism with moral zealotry ([Wight 2020](#)). Some are academics whose work draws on Queer Theory, a broad intellectual approach that challenges the existence of stable identities or dualistic categories, arguing that not just gender but also sex is constructed and “performed” ([Butler 2006](#)). Others, in unrelated disciplines, have simply adopted this theoretical position as activists.

Lowrey ([2021](#): 759) points out the incongruity of the alliance between Queer Theory and bureaucracy:

At first blush, this would seem an unlikely alignment. Scholars influenced by Foucault usually figure themselves as political revolutionaries, while administrators looking to remake the university are unabashedly influenced by capitalist models ([Christensen & Eyring, 2011](#)). Where their interests intersect is in their shared contempt for the traditional university and their shared sense that nothing is more vital than deconstructing and reconstructing it along novel lines...From an administrative point of view, EDI creates unprecedented entrée into processes once, frustratingly, entirely in the hands of faculty: hiring, promoting, and honoring. From a revolutionary faculty point of view, a berth in administration is no longer a cross to be borne for some portion of an academic career but instead the best means to do the most important possible work because it affords an opportunity to transform the social construction of

knowledge, which they take to be key to remaking the world.

Irrespective of the motivations of those taking on these roles, EDI work has shifted away from opposing unlawful discrimination and towards the promotion of a particular ideological perspective. This shift has had systematic implications for higher education, from staff training and the student curriculum ([Sokal 2021](#); [Advance HE 2019](#)) to equalities monitoring and recruitment and promotion processes ([Sailer 2022](#)).

There is no inherent tension between the values of equality and inclusion and that of academic freedom. Indeed, as [Kenan Malik \(2022\)](#) commented regarding the recent violent attack on Salman Rushdie, it is often the most marginalized and disempowered individuals who are victims of restrictions on free speech, given that “what is deemed ‘offence to a community’ is more often a debate within communities” and that progressive political movements rely on being able to “speak truth to power.” Rushdie himself both embodies and has articulated such arguments ([Rushdie 2015](#)).

EDI roles should hold responsibility for upholding the rights and protections of all groups within the diverse staff and student population. Entryism into such roles by activists committed to promoting a particular ideological agenda has led to a situation where university employees whose views do not align with this agenda can find their academic freedom compromised. This extends well beyond overt attempts to silence academics.

Commentators on the “culture wars” frequently make the argument that there is no crisis of academic freedom and that claims to the contrary are merely the latest weapons to be used by powerful elites in a backlash against the forces of social justice (see, for example, [Ramsay 2021](#)). Proponents of the view that there is no real threat to academic freedom in the UK often cite a [2018 BBC Freedom of Information request](#) claiming that there had only been six occasions since 2010 on which universities had cancelled speakers as a result of complaints and only four cases of course content being changed as a result of student complaints, or a [WONKHE](#) survey of 61 student unions that showed that in 2019-2020, student unions claimed to have cancelled just six events. These reports are treated as authoritative, yet it is unclear what data student unions and universities would have used in responding to such requests for information. In our experience, no-platforming is usually done furtively, with some attempt at concealment ([Sullivan 2021](#)), and the idea that accurate records of these incidents are kept and reported seems extraordinarily naïve.

More fundamentally, as we have argued elsewhere ([Suisa and Sullivan 2021](#)), to equate threats to academic freedom *only* with overt instances of no-platforming and cancelation of events is to wildly misunderstand the reality of academic life and to ignore what is happening on the ground. High-profile cases of public figures whose invitations to speak on campus have been revoked represent only the most visible manifestation of a deeper structural issue ([Ahmed et al. 2022](#)).

Similarly, the focus on curriculum changes made in response to student complaints glosses over systematic EDI-led curriculum change, which usurps expert control over the syllabus ([Advance HE 2019](#)). One example is a current [Quality Assurance Agency \(QAA\) consultation](#) on the subject benchmark for university mathematics that suggests that the mathematics curriculum should be “decolonized” and that students should be taught that some past mathematicians had “problematic” views. This implies that mathematical content must be displaced from the curriculum in favor of teaching a particular political and theoretical perspective.

The implications of EDI becoming a vehicle for activist staff go far beyond overt attempts to silence academics. Nevertheless, our experience of an attempt, led by staff in EDI roles, to shut down a conference on women’s rights provides some instructive insights into EDI activism.

Women’s Liberation 2020

We were co-organizers with Woman’s Place UK (WPUK) of an event, in February 2020, marking 50 years since the first Women’s Liberation Conference at Ruskin College, Oxford. It brought together academics, politicians, journalists, lawyers, and activists working in fields such as women’s rights, domestic abuse, and sex trafficking. University College London (UCL) has a code of practice on freedom of speech and a policy for managing external events, both of which were fully complied with by the conference organizers.

Ten UCL colleagues posted a [letter](#) virulently attacking the conference organizers and demanding that the then-Provost prevent this conference on women’s rights from going ahead at UCL. The letter-writers used the familiar tactic of smearing the characters of individuals involved in the conference rather than engaging with the content, which they did not mention in their letter. They denounced our third-sector partners WPUK in defamatory terms:

WPUK’s views on gender identity are transphobic and discriminatory. They go against everything that UCL has been trying to do in promoting equality, diversity and

inclusion, and are in direct contradiction to Stonewall's UK Workplace Equality Index.

It goes without saying that the accusation of “transphobia” is a complete distortion, at least in the ordinary sense of that word ([Sokal 2022](#)). WPUK fully supports the right of transgender people to live their lives free from harassment, discrimination, and violence—a right enshrined in the 2010 Equality Act, where “gender reassignment” is one of nine protected characteristics. However, WPUK does disagree with what the letter-writers rather tendentiously called “proposed improvements [sic] to the Gender Recognition Act.”

The letter concludes with an explicit call for UCL administrators to cancel the conference on the grounds that: “Letting this conference go ahead will result in a huge backlash from staff and students and cause considerable reputational damage to the university. It will also cause emotional damage to trans colleagues and students.”

Six of the leading signatories of this unambiguous attack on viewpoint diversity and women's freedom of association within the university were EDI leads for their faculties, called “EDI vice deans,” while others were prominent in UCL-supported LGBTQ+ activist networks. Despite the fact that these colleagues publicized their petition in the [student press](#), the number of signatories—even counting students—was decidedly modest. Nevertheless, they succeeded in creating substantial difficulties for us as organizers.

These EDI activists pressured UCL managers to prevent the event from going ahead, leading to a raft of excessive demands on the organizers. We were told to put the release of tickets on hold; we were asked to record every session (including workshops where survivors of sexual violence and other vulnerable women had agreed to speak); and we were asked to hire extra security to cover every room used for our more than 30 parallel sessions, thus imposing prohibitive costs that could have only been met by charging a far higher ticket price and thereby making the conference far less inclusive.

We were even told that we should invite further speakers to present an alternative viewpoint so as to ensure “balance.” It is hard to imagine what would qualify as an “alternative view” on a panel entitled “Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.”

None of the letter-writers contacted us to ask for more information about the conference, which they would of course have been welcome to attend

and during which they would have been free to express their views. In fact, they rebuffed our attempts to arrange a meeting to discuss the matter with them and address any concerns they may have had about the proposed conference program.

While academics expect their work to be subject to criticism and peer review, there is a vast difference between rejecting a conference paper or a journal article following a review of its contents by academics within the relevant field, and rejecting an entire conference program, speaker or event purely on the basis of the topic or the identity of the speaker, based on political rather than scholarly objections. Those who defend no-platforming sometimes appear willfully blind to the difference between scholarly judgment and attempts to silence experts by activists who have prejudged a case on the basis of their ideological position.

At the time of the conference, the UK government was carrying out a consultation on changes to the Gender Recognition Act (2004), a piece of legislation that was intended to allow transsexual people to change their legal sex. Proposed changes would have allowed gender self-identification, meaning that anyone could change their legal sex on request. This proposal was the subject of much public interest. WPUK opposed gender self-ID on the grounds that it would undermine women's existing legal rights, for example the rights to single-sex spaces and sports.

The signatories' citing of UCL's membership of Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index as a reason for objecting to the conference is illustrative of the alignment of EDI activists with a particular ideological position, rather than with a general commitment to upholding equalities legislation. Stonewall is a lobby group that advocates for gender self-identification, demanding affirmation of the mantra "Trans Women Are Women" and explicitly stating that there is "no debate" on questions of sex and gender. EDI colleagues would have been committed to achieving a high ranking in Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index ([Sullivan 2022](#)) and explicitly alleged a conflict between hosting a conference on women's rights and membership of the Stonewall scheme.

As a result of these threatening tactics by activists, we did not know until the morning of the conference whether it would be allowed to proceed. In the end, the conference did go ahead, with around a thousand women (and a few men) attending an enormously stimulating and successful event that featured high-profile speakers and panel discussions covering a wide range of topics, including law and policy relating to women.

The event received favorable national media coverage on Radio 4's "[Woman's Hour](#)." A student protest attracted only around 30 protesters; UCL has over 40,000 students. (A student who co-organized the protest was subsequently hired by UCL in an EDI role). One notable feature of the conference was the high level of lesbian representation and visibility among both speakers and attendees. It is ironic that EDI representatives should have opposed such an event.

Critics claiming there is no crisis of academic freedom in universities would likely point to the fact that the conference went ahead as evidence for their claim. Certainly, UCL deserves credit for its handling of such issues compared to other universities such as Edinburgh ([Benjamin 2021](#)), Essex ([Reindorf 2021](#)), and Sussex ([Stock 2021](#)). Yet this failed attempt at no-platforming highlighted the barriers to open and collegial discussion on sex and gender. As senior and experienced staff in secure positions, we were able to invest the considerable resources of time, effort, and intellectual energy required to resist the unreasonable demands that UCL managers—at the instigation of EDI activists—attempted to place on the conference.

[Junior and precariously employed](#) workers are less well-placed to negotiate with powerful senior managers and push back against their demands. Given the emotional and professional costs of speaking out on this issue ([Griffiths 2021](#)), it is unlikely that such staff would take the risk of trying to organize such an event in the first place—or of engaging with such “contentious” topics in their teaching or research. These tactics therefore, even if they are ultimately unsuccessful in a given instance, send a powerful warning message to individuals who dissent from the dominant ideological position. In such cases, as in cases where HR investigates individual staff members following anonymous complaints about alleged transphobia, even when such complaints turn out to be groundless, “the process is the punishment.”

The example above is illustrative of a pattern of behavior. Subsequently, UCL's EDI committee lobbied to remain within schemes run by Stonewall, and LGBT+ networks objected to the fact that academic governance ultimately prevailed in taking a different view ([Adams 2021](#)).

UCL staff in EDI roles were also among activists who signed an [open letter](#) objecting to one of us (AS) being platformed by Advance HE, a sector-led charity that runs national EDI frameworks Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter ([Sullivan and Armstrong 2022a](#)), to talk about the subject of sex and data collection. The letter described her views as “dangerously transphobic.” AS's talk simply expressed the view that universities should collect data on sex as well as data on gender identity ([Sullivan and Armstrong 2022b](#); [Sullivan 2021](#)).

In fact, there is a Public Sector Equality Duty on UK universities to collect data on sex as part of their equalities monitoring. To fail to do so would be unlawful. AS was therefore smeared as transphobic for advocating that universities should comply with the law. Interestingly, the open letter was published after an attempt to have AS no-platformed on this particular occasion had already failed. The goal of the letter was to intimidate the hosts of the event, Advance HE, in the hope that they would not engage further with the views of academics who take a materialist view of sex in line with current UK equalities legislation.

What Are the Implications?

One possible response to incidents such as those we describe above is to frame the attempt to silence as itself a form of free speech ([Letsas 2022](#)). But this is to invoke the Heckler's Veto ([Cherminsky 2010](#)), confusing the right to protest with a right to silence others. Speech that is merely intended to silence the speech of others, far from contributing to knowledge and learning, narrows the scope of the educational sphere. To frame attempts to silence as equally valued speech ignores the educational purpose of the university.

A “both sides” framing also ignores the power dynamic at play, whereby activists with institutional power who are often ignorant of the body of knowledge or the diversity of views within relevant fields seek to silence the discipline-based arguments of academics, often without first attempting to discover what those arguments are. Though activism on campus may be defended on free-speech grounds, universities should be mindful of the chilling effects of such activism when it strays into attempts to impose a particular viewpoint on the university as a public institution. Even failed attempts at no-platforming can generate a climate of fear, intimidation, and self-censorship. Activists routinely use libelous statements and attempts to de-platform with the aim of creating an intimidating and hostile environment for people with the protected belief that sex is real and immutable ([Forstater v. CGD](#)). Such behavior is particularly egregious when carried out by activists in EDI roles.

To be ignorantly intolerant of any differing creed, belief or opinion is the definition of bigotry. The work of addressing injustice and inequality requires engaging in difficult conversations and balancing conflicting views, not freezing out dissent. It is gravely ironic that EDI has become a source of harassment and discrimination for women and other university staff who believe that sex matters. It is especially troubling that attacks on academic freedom, viewpoint diversity, and the long-standing norms of scholarly debate have emanated from staff in EDI roles. Universities need to take a

hard look at the structures they have created and how they can be reformed to promote genuine equality, diversity, and inclusion.

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EPISTEMIC TROUBLES: IDENTITY POLITICS BETWEEN PARTICULARISM AND UNIVERSALISM

by Karsten Schubert

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One problem often associated with identity politics is “[positional fundamentalism](#),” the equating of social positions with epistemic possibilities and political dispositions. The criticism is that identity politics is usually more about who says something than what is said. This goes hand in hand with perspective relativity, which no longer allows for a common, universal position and therefore also [prevents emancipative politics](#). To respond to this critique of positional fundamentalism and perspective relativism, I develop a new account of identity politics as inherently intersubjective and fundamental to democracy. This approach is necessary to address the philosophical problem at the heart of debates about identity politics: the tension between particularist power politics, on the one hand, and politics as a universalist appeal to reason, on the other.

Because the tension between particularism and universalism, or power and reason, is a core theme of radical democratic theory, it is a framework particularly well-suited to understanding identity politics. From a radical democratic perspective, identity politics is fundamental to democracy. This interpretation draws on the work of Lefort, Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière, who propose an understanding of the existing political order as necessarily particularistic and exclusive. Democracy, on the other hand, is the ongoing struggle for equality and freedom, and therefore aims to change the existing democratic institutions. And the universal claims of equality and freedom can only become effective through their repeated actualization in particular power struggles. Disruptively breaking through established understandings of universal discourse through particular identity politics is central to the further democratization of democracy. The radical democratic affirmation of identity politics as a particular disruption of the universal, however, *prima facie* confirms the fear that it amounts to a relativist position that destroys rational discourse and thus the foundation of democracy.

This problem can be solved with the help of standpoint theories, which allow us to justify and reconcile two (at first sight) contradictory claims: that particular standpoints are necessary to critique the current discursive and

institutional order; and that such standpoints are based on intersubjective reason and therefore have an inherent consensus orientation. Following standpoint theories' concepts of "[strong objectivity](#)" and "[situated knowledge](#)," I propose to introduce a new notion of objectivity into the radical democratic account of identity politics. Standpoint theory shows how identity politics, although articulated from particular standpoints that critique conventional objectivity, contributes to the objective analysis of social relations. The radical democratic and standpoint theory interpretation of identity politics thus explains that the constant oscillation between particularism and universalism is constitutive of democracy. Thus, identity politics does not endanger democracy, but democratizes it. In what follows, I explain in four points that privileging suppressed perspectives does not eliminate intersubjective understanding but rather enables it. These four points are, first, the difference between perspective and standpoint; second, knowledge production as mediation between particularity and universality; third, epistemic blockages and learning; and fourth, the importance of power politics for rational change.

Perspectives and Standpoints

A perspective is a specific viewpoint connected to a social position, while a standpoint requires work and development. A [standpoint](#) is not "an ascribed position [...] that oppressed groups can claim automatically. Rather, a standpoint is an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle." The term is not "simply another word for viewpoint or perspective."

While this definition of the terms is not generally shared by standpoint theorists, and many use perspective and standpoint as synonyms, all standpoint theorists agree with the conceptual difference at stake. A standpoint is not in any way given, but the result of social knowledge production through intersubjectively shared discourses. The construction of a standpoint requires specific political and cultural techniques and methods. A key component is what MacKinnon calls "[consciousness raising](#)": the exchange of experiences between members of oppressed groups that is the necessary condition for the development of critical consciousness among the members of this group. Consciousness raising is necessary because hegemonic ideologies are so strong that they can deform the epistemic capabilities of oppressed subjects in such a way that they often do not see their oppression.

MacKinnon leaves out another element that is crucial for the development of standpoints: the creation of a shared culture within the oppressed groups that facilitates and promotes the development of critical standpoints vis-à-vis hegemony by valuing the particularity of the oppressed group. Hill

Collins [shows](#) that Black women resist the oppressive structures they face through “the act of insisting on Black female self-definition [that] validates Black women’s power and as human subjects,” often cultivating specifically those “aspects of Black female behavior that are seen as most threatening to white patriarchy.” Such culture encourages Black women to “embrace their assertiveness, to value their sassiness, and to continue to use these qualities to survive and transcend the harsh environments that circumscribe so many of Black women’s lives.”

In a similar vein, the [gender performances](#) of [gay queens and fairies](#) work by amplifying and appropriating the homophobic discourse that discriminates against them as too feminine. Such a resistant culture—which does not adapt to discrimination and stereotyping but re-appropriates them to amplify the particular identity of the oppressed group—is a necessary condition for the development of standpoints.

Particularity and Universality

How can such identity-political intersubjectivity be more than a discursive bubble with no communicative links to mainstream discourse? How can standpoint particularity be connected to universality? These questions are pressing both for understanding identity politics as more than “[positional foundationalism](#)” and for understanding consensus orientation and objectivity within radical democracy. The answer is academic truth production. The definition of a standpoint, in contrast to mere perspective, involves not only intersubjective discourse and cultural construction based on the experiences of oppressed groups, but also research in connection to these minoritarian knowledges. Thus, “[a standpoint is an achievement \[...\] that requires both science and politics \[...\] to be internally linked, contrary to the standard Liberal, empiricist, Enlightenment view](#)” (italics added).

That standpoints are based on academic theorizing that seeks objectivity, truth, and intersubjectivity is most clear in Hartsock’s Marxist feminist [account](#): “The vision available to the oppressed [...] requires [...] *science to see beneath the surface of the social relations* [...]. [It] exposes the *real relations* among human beings as inhuman” (italics added). From a post-foundationalist perspective, such a concept of ideology as opposed to the objective truth of real relations raises objections. After all, it is such traditional Marxist epistemology against which the [radical democratic critique of objectivity](#) is directed, as the former has turned out to be under-complex and politically exclusionary. Specifically, such universalist epistemology is put forward by contemporary Marxist critics who accuse identity politics of lacking an objective class analysis. The problem of such conventionally objectivist accounts is that they falsely universalize one social theory, failing to take into account the multiplicity of standpoints.

Thus, what is needed is a third way between conventional objectivity (such as in liberalism and Marxism) and relativism that easily follows from the post-foundationalist skepticism.

The concepts of “situated knowledges” and “strong objectivity” are meant to navigate this tension. The key is not only to pluralize knowledge production, which follows from the fact that “[only partial perspective promises objective vision](#),” but also to continuously critically reflect on the construction processes of these situated knowledges and the “instruments of vision [that] mediate standpoints [as] there is no immediate vision from the standpoints of the subjugated.” This critical reflection is the opposite of the essentialism that sometimes structures (failed) identity-political practice but is today often associated with identity politics as a whole: “The search for such a ‘full’ and total position is the search for the fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history.”

To be sure, specific acts of identity-political practice might engage in such problematic essentialism and positional foundationalism. Standpoint knowledge gains stronger objectivity by intersubjectively reflecting that “[subjects/agents of knowledge \[...\] are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory incoherent](#).” The critical reflection of multiplicity allows intersubjective understanding and strong objectivity.

While standpoint knowledge is constructed from the experiences of specific groups, it aims at its universalization; it can and should be universally understood. Harding insists that “women are [not] the unique generators of feminist knowledge. [...] Feminist theory, with its rich and contradictory tendencies, has helped us all—women as well as men—to understand how to do.” This is also a crucial clarification of radical democratic theory: emancipatory “[chains of equivalence](#)” can be constructed by intersubjective work toward strong objectivity.

Communication and Learning

The objective knowledge generated through standpoints can and should be learned and known by everyone, independent of their perspective. This entails high critical reflexivity regarding the construction of all situated knowledges, especially those of dominant groups. As today’s epistemic exclusions are mostly due to a lack of such critical reflexivity on the part of privileged actors that can blend out the situatedness of their knowledge by referring to the conventional concept of objectivity as a “god trick,” [standpoint theory](#) “challenges members of dominant groups to make themselves ‘fit’ to engage in collaborative, democratic, community enterprises with marginal [sic!] peoples. Such a project requires learning to listen attentively to marginalized people; [...] it requires critical examination

of the dominant institutional beliefs and practices that systematically disadvantage them; it requires critical self-examination to discover how one unwittingly participates in generating disadvantage to them . . . and more.”

While the feminist and post-colonialist standpoint theories of the 1980s and 1990s focused on conceptualizing the privileged knowledge of oppressed groups to refine the notions of objectivity and intersubjective understanding, a new generation of standpoint theorists researches the epistemic shortcomings of both the dominant groups and the supporting social institutions in great detail (see [Fricker 2007](#); [Mills 1997, 2007](#); [Medina 2013](#), [Tuana and Sullivan 2007](#); [Peels and Blaauw 2016](#)).

These works detail which “dominant institutional beliefs and practices” of ignorance need to be overcome to allow for the democratization of democracy through strong objectivity. [Fricker](#) differentiates between two kinds of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice describes the lack of credibility attributed to the speaker due to the prejudices of the listeners. It hinders the communication of knowledge, doubt, and critique and thus leads to false beliefs on the part of the listener, beliefs they could have corrected had they listened unbiased. Thus, testimonial injustice is not only problematic for the speaker, but also harms the general epistemic system. When testimonial injustice is structural and persistent, for example through its inscription in social institutions, it can lead to hermeneutical marginalization.

[Hermeneutical marginalization](#) describes a situation in which some social groups make only a very small contribution to the shared pool of concepts we use to communicate about our social experiences. When members of these oppressed groups explain their social experiences to members of dominant groups, their experiences may not be understood due to a lack of shared concepts. For example, when women are hindered from contributing to the pool of concepts, this can result in a very narrow definition of rape, such that they might not be understood when they report rape, as what they report might not be covered by said narrow definition. The injustice that results from this lack of understanding is what Fricker calls hermeneutical injustice, i.e., the institutionalization of hermeneutical marginalization and testimonial injustice.

The stabilization of racism is a typical case of epistemic injustice in all its different forms. Mill calls it [White ignorance](#), “a systemic group-based miscognition” entailing “false belief and the absence of true belief” that stems from racist perceptions, white-supremacist ideology, and hegemonic (racist) collective memory narratives. Mills reiterates the point of earlier standpoint theories that the goal of the critique of knowledge is to build

stronger objectivity: “Mapping an epistemology of ignorance is for me a preliminary to reformulating an epistemology that will give us genuine knowledge.” [Medina](#) further differentiates the ignorances that support racism: While racial insensitivity indeed follows from “basic ignorance,” it is mostly strengthened by “active ignorance,” an array of resistances against knowing to protect systematic ignorance. Medina calls the result meta-ignorance: “Racially insensitive people of this sort are [...] *numbed to their own numbness*, that is, incapable of reacting to it or even of recognizing how they have become numbed” (italics original). Most often, it comes along with a further form of resistance, namely active meta-ignorance, which is directed against “epistemic friction,” or interaction with different perspectives, which could otherwise alleviate meta-ignorance.

The focus on the epistemic shortcomings of social institutions and dominant groups underlines the crucial point for the radical democratic interpretation of identity politics. Identity politics is offering intersubjective knowledge about the social world; it is a matter of strong objective truth. As such, this knowledge can be understood and productively implemented in democratic deliberation.

Reason and Power

The discussion has shown that identity politics based on standpoints is a matter of reason and knowledge, not of decisionistic power struggles. It is a matter of curing epistemic failures such as epistemic ignorance, insensitivity, and numbness. To this end, it is vital to secure equal access to social and political institutions, which generates strong objectivity. In other words, to reach strong objectivity, it is necessary to democratize democracy. However, the epistemic blockades that are iterated through social systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia, and capitalist ideology—often prevent reasonable voices from being heard. Thus, the academic mapping and analyzing of the objective shortcomings of the current hegemony is not enough to foster political and epistemological change.

The reason for this is that political institutions are not designed on the basis of a reasonable agreement, but are the sedimentation of historical power struggles. Radical democratic theory sees protest and civil disobedience outside of the realms of institutionalized discourse as key for democratization, precisely because of the relative political impotence of reason alone (Celikates [2020](#), [2016](#)).

To understand this process, we need a historical and dialectical model of power and reason. Existing regimes (police, in Rancière’s terms) are challenged by protest that transgresses the hegemonic standards of

reasonable deliberation, as these standards are not universalist, but privilege dominant groups through hermeneutic injustice. The protest, while engaging in political power struggles that can take confrontational and non-discursive forms (i.e., shutting down people, rejecting discourse, etc.), is guided by strong objectivity developed by reason. This reason draws on the shared normative conceptual pool of democracy and is thereby understood and adopted by some members and/or institutions of social hegemony. This is more likely when identity political projects manage to form alliances through “[chains of equivalence](#)”—that is, when they search for and build common political goals and strategies with other political projects and develop a practice of solidarity with them.

Through a combination of power and reason, the oppressed standpoint can slowly inscribe itself into the hegemonic knowledge and the institutions that uphold it and correct its shortcomings. When the minoritarian discourse has gained some wider social support and understanding but remains essentially contested, power politics often take the form of redistributing access to institutions and discourses, such as through affirmative action programs, diversity quotas, or the de-platforming of representatives of the dominant discourse, commonly called “cancel culture.” These mechanisms are needed to create epistemic friction over the resistance of actively ignorant subjects, as an “[insensitive individual will need external help](#).”

This “help” is a matter of power rather than just reason, as reason alone is of limited use precisely because of the epistemic limitations that privileged actors suffer. Nevertheless, it is key that these power politics cannot work without being backed up by reason, without leading to higher standards of rationality that can be and are being rationally defended. Such power politics only find support among some members of the dominant groups because/if they are reasonable, they (implicitly or explicitly) refer to the shared pool of universalist democratic commitments, and they are aimed at intersubjective understanding.

In sum, the radical democratic and standpoint theory account of identity politics shows that particularist identity politics are necessary for the democratization of democracy. By communicatively disrupting conventional understandings of universalism and objectivity, identity politics reestablish the space for deliberation. Because interpretations of equality and freedom will remain contested, democratization is a dynamic process that does not come to a halt. Thus, the tension between particularity of perspectives and universality—or power and reason—cannot be resolved; rather, the oscillation between particularism and universalism is a necessary feature of democratization through identity politics, and thus of democracy as a whole. Positional fundamentalism and

perspective relativism are the result of politics that nevertheless attempt to resolve this tension unilaterally toward particularism. They are not, however, a fundamental problem of the further development of democratic universalism, which must begin with the pluralization of identity-political standpoints.

Some of the material of this text appeared in an earlier and shorter German text at <https://rise-jugendkultur.de/artikel/partikularismus-und-universalismus-in-der-migrationsgesellschaft/>.

ULTIMATELY, IDENTITY DOESN'T MATTER: OVERCOMING THE TIRESOME FIGHTS IN CULTURE WARS REQUIRES FIGHTING A MATERIAL WORLD WHERE IDENTITIES ARE REASONABLE MEANS

By Thomas Land

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Repeating Arguments...

The entire discussion of identity, privileges, and discrimination is situated between two fiercely contested positions.

On one side, there are those who identify and criticize existing privileges as unjustified and therefore illegitimate advantages. To overcome these *unjustified* advantages, they propose the implementation of *justified* advantages for those who are subject to discrimination. Here, identity politics is taken as an emancipative project. As Karsten Schubert declared in his contribution to the Culture Wars Series, “[identity politics is fundamental to democracy](#),” since the articulation and inclusion of hitherto suppressed voices and particular standpoints leads to a permanent and never-ending revision of democratic universalism—a dynamic that is taken to be the very core of democracy as an ideal that is always “to come” (Derrida). In Schubert’s view, “[d]isruptively breaking through established understandings of universal discourse through particular identity politics is central to the further democratization of democracy.” The same line of argument—adjusted appropriately—is used in the field of science: more diversity—especially by including the subaltern—gives rise to a more robust or “strong objectivity” ([Harding 2015](#); for a meditation on the entanglement of the political and the academic, see [Speck/Villa](#)). From this standpoint, any opposition to identity politics, whether in the political or scientific sphere, appears as a form of [backlash](#).

On the other side of the debate, there are those who do not consider identity politics a progressive tool that serves to democratize democracies by disrupting our conventional understandings of universalism, common sense, and objectivity by recognizing hitherto excluded standpoints. Rather,

they see the identification of (others' unjustified) privileges and the claiming of (justified) privileges (for themselves) as a tool by which for those who are allegedly discriminated against, excluded or oppressed to get their hands on (mostly public) resources or positions and thereby gain illegitimate advantages. By constantly making up new and more bizarre types of discrimination and oppression, the “discriminated against” seek not merely to level the playing-field or open up/widen the space for democratic deliberation. Rather, they—or so these critics allege—want to establish a new social order that would make “ordinary people” the new, oppressed minority.

Identity politics does not serve to compensate powerlessness but—as in Nietzsche's famous story about the genealogy of morals—is a trick played by the oppressed to become the new masters. In our “[postheroic](#)” times with their “[victimhood culture](#),” this self-positioning as powerless finally gives rise not only to neotribalism, but also to a “competition of victims” that sees “[marginalized groups struggling primarily to be recognized as oppressed and thus affirming rather than challenging the social hierarchy](#).” This leads—for example, in DEI departments—to a “[tacit hierarchy of rights](#)” where some identities are prioritized at the expense of others (and being discriminated against intersectionally is the ultimate trump card). The critics of identity politics claim that it has caused things to become weirdly distorted and perverted: defensive weapons like minority rights and anti-discrimination legislation, originally designed to protect minorities from falling behind, are now used to attack and oppress the majority (an argument that is mostly brazen exaggeration on the part of conservatives who seek to conserve or retain the pole position of declining elites).

To question the unquestioned standards of our societal order is indeed one of the aims of identity politics. In earlier (“normal”) times, the argument goes, deviations from the standard of the white, male, heterosexual citizen needed to be reduced, leveled out or lifted up until the normative standard was reached. Today, however, the normative standard of the white, straight, male citizen is being deconstructed as Eurocentric, heteronormative, and patriarchal—that is, a particular standpoint only pretending to be universal.

...in a Ritualized Conflict

The two sides fight each other in a highly formalized, stereotyped and almost ritualized manner, as in a scripted reality TV show. By repeating and varying a well-known set of “conflict rhetoric” claims—like calling the opponent hegemonic and themselves marginalized—a specific “[form of culture wars](#)” is reproduced and maintained. Already, the performative speech act of reducing a complex social situation to *one* new cleavage—the “simple and self-righteous opposition between a good, liberal, open-

minded, and progressive culture, on the one hand, and a bad, racist, close-minded, and regressive culture, on the other hand“—must be deciphered as part of the game, as [Biskamps](#) has shown.

Identity Politics as Ordinary Politics

Since “everything is already said, but not by everyone,” as the German saying goes, I will not repeat the arguments for and against identity politics. It is in any case nonsensical to say that one is *for* or *against* identity politics as such: politics is always connected with actors who speak out or represent specific ideas, interests or norms. As Zora Hesová put it in her contribution to this series, “[\[c\]onflicts about identity, values, and norms are part of ordinary politics.](#)” Nor will I emphasize once again the immanent ambivalence of identity politics, its status as an empty signifier and essentially contested concept that different actors can charge with different and even opposing meanings. Nor will I deal with the phenomenon of reification and play out the (good) “strategic essentialism” (Spivak) of a “[constructivist identity politics](#)” against the (bad) ontologization or hypostasis of identities as a perversion of the original idea—made possible by acts of [elite capture](#) and in the [interest of \(academic\) elites](#). Nor will I join in the (radical) left critique that the normative horizon of identity politics is a bourgeois form of “equal opportunity and performance” justice, as already guaranteed in the formal rights of liberal states, and in this respect does not exceed “progressive neoliberalism” (Nancy Fraser).

Materialistic Questions

Instead of engaging in the debate on one side or the other, I would like to step back and interrogate the socio-economic conditions that made identity politics not only possible but likely.

I am especially interested in the question of why the German left is so engaged in a discourse that has its roots in the political right. It was the political right that rediscovered (collective) identity and community as antidotes to the crises of the 1970s ([Marquard/Stierle 1979](#), [Vobruha 1983](#); for a historical overview of the trajectory of the concept of identity, see [Giesen 1993](#), [Giesen 1999](#), and [Niethammer 2000](#), and for the thesis that the right and the left have changed places, see [Koschorke 2023](#)).

As [Perinelli](#) rightly stated in his contribution to this series, the contemporary left in Germany is a product of the decay of the various Maoist and Leninist K-Groups and their program of an avant-garde party politics. Wanting to liberate themselves from the “economical” materialist theory, the “undogmatic” [Spontis](#) and the [\(left-\)alternative milieu](#) turned toward spontaneous, unorthodox forms of political practice and post-

Marxist or poststructural theories ([Felsch 2021](#)). However, while undoubtedly playing an important role in revealing the many deficiencies of the Marxist theory of the 1960s and 1970s, they threw the baby out with the bathwater. What was intended to break out of the orthodox Marxist paradigm ended up as a “[new left orthodoxy](#)” with its own dogma, rituals, and culture of confession ([Kirchick 2023](#), [Kováts 2023](#)).

One key element of this New Left Orthodoxy is the focus on intra-class conflicts and cleavages, i.e., the many forms of oppression and domination within the working class (to which belong all those who do not own any means of production). The almost [obsessive concern with dominance and subordination within the working class](#)—instead of the exploitation of one class (workers) by another class (capitalists)—must be understood and deciphered as the result of the many advancements, improvements, and adjustments of the “traditionalist” Marxist account in the 1970s and 1980s, among them the dependence theory, the concept of Racial Capitalism, and the Social Reproduction Theory. All of these accounts claimed that “normal exploitation” (by privileged white males in the West) is based on the un- or underpaid work done in the Global South, by black people, or by women outside “regular” production. Because of its internal dynamic of self-destruction, the stabilizing resources for capitalism must come from (local or social) spheres outside the productive center of capitalism. Here, black people, women, and other minorities are super-exploited on the basis of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination so the regular exploitation “in the center” can continue. Because (white) people in the West benefit from the transfer of wealth from the (deprived) peripheries to the (privileged) center (and therefore have no interest in ending capitalism), the emancipation of the south, black people or women is—this argument goes—the only remaining way to overthrow capitalism. From this it follows that the anti-imperialist, anti-racial or feminist fight is inherently anti-capitalist, since it undermines and withdraws the external but necessary supports for capitalism.

Identity as Symbolic Capital...

While it is true that capitalism depends structurally on various separations—between economic and political, private and public, production and reproduction—for the transfer of resources of one sphere to another, it is not true that, in doing so, capitalism prefers one particular group over another ([Mau 2023 \(Chapter 7\)](#), [Lange 2021](#) and [Cicheria 2022](#)). It is irrelevant who plays the role of the “external.” Capitalism, being a mode of production, does not care who is the actor behind the “character mask.” In addition to Ellen M. Wood’s famous statement that capitalism “[is uniquely indifferent to the social identities of the people it exploits](#),” we can say it is also indifferent to the social identities of the people it super-

exploits (for this argument, see [Chibber 2022: 128-142](#)). For the capital (and its representatives and agents), it does not matter who fulfills its systematic functions. [For the individual worker, however, it makes a huge difference where in the internal division within the working class he or she is located/positioned.](#) And this is where identities, privilege talk, and discrimination come in: they are used by competitors in a market-based society to achieve a better position. To make a long story short, the concept of identity is bound up with—and restricted to—the question of who is (morally) justified in filling or (historically) entitled to fill the existing roles, which are already set before any of the competitors steps onto the market (for jobs, housing, education, funding, and so on). Referring to discrimination and the entitlement derived from it is a strategy to improve *individuals'* positions in a predetermined situation of conflicts of interests ([Chibber 2022: 62-67](#)). Being discriminated against is thus, following Bourdieu, symbolic capital that can be transformed into other forms of capital. Against this background, it is understandable why the concept of [intersectionality](#) and the combination of multiple oppressions has become so prominent of late. To point out experiences of (multiple) discrimination and/or to exaggerate the privileges of others is a way to create what Andreas Reckwitz calls "[singularity](#)": a state of originality or uniqueness that increases someone's market value by allowing them to stand out from the masses.

...for Middle Classes

But here we have to be more precise. Identity can only be played as a trump card for gaining access to jobs, funding, housing, and so on, within the specific social milieu of the—mostly academic—[middle classes](#). Privileges do not play a role in situations with little or no rivalry. Referring to discrimination when applying for a low-paid job at McDonald's or Uber makes no sense—there are plenty of them. And skin color, sexual orientation, and gender discrimination are not an issue when one is forced to move to a poor neighborhood where no one wants to live and landlords or owners are happy to rent or sell to anyone, regardless of their sex, age or skin color. The same is true on the other end of the social spectrum: since cash is "printed freedom," one is free to be whatever he or she wants if one can afford it. In general, identity politics only plays an important role in situations of competition or rivalry, for those who are looking for new alliances or (at least) security through belonging to a peer group. Comparable to the appearance/emergence of questions of meaning—which only comes up when the subject's involvement in unquestioned and "meaningful" social relations dissolves—identity only becomes an issue when someone's existence is contested. In this respect, we should take identity politics as a sign of (expected or actual) more severe competition within the middle classes. As Chibber puts it:

“In a situation of generalized labor market competition, the easier means for increasing one’s security is not building formal organizations for collective action—since this inevitably runs into conflict with the employer—but relying on the informal networks into which workers are born. These most commonly are networks of kin, caste, ethnicity, race, and so on. Since workers essentially inherit these connections ready-made, they become a natural source of support in normal times and especially in times of dearth. It is an irony of bourgeois society that, far from dissolving these extramarket ties, as Marx announced with such flourish in *The Communist Manifesto*, its pressures incline workers to cling to them with a desperate ferocity.”
([Chibber 2022: 64](#))

This is not the place to scrutinize in detail the socio-economic conditions and recent developments that have made the hype of identity politics (as the form of politics), privilege talk (as its content), and moralizing (as the preferred rhetoric) increasingly relevant (for more on this, see the debate on classes in [Leviathan 2021/1-4](#)). But let me give you one example of what an argument might look like: a reason for the rise of identity politics could be the conjunction of the politics-fostered trend of academization and the social rise of second- or third-generation immigrants. Despite working hard to get into higher education, many young professionals with a migration background find themselves stuck in a situation where they are paid less, despite having the same university degree as their non-migrant counterparts. Those affected blame this unfair situation on society and its racist institutions.

Material Base for Ideas

I cannot prove this claimed causal connection between the general academization of Western societies, educational climbers (German: *Bildungsaufsteiger*) with a migration background rushing into the universities, the denial of opportunities to everyone in a situation where there are many graduates, and identity politics as a reaction to this situation. Instead, my goal is to emphasize that ideas must rest on material interests to become relevant. Without a material base, ideas, concepts or claims arise and vanish but do not become an accepted and repeated element of the public discourse. In other words, ideas have to correspond to or mesh with practices in the social reality to persist. The capacity for ideals and ideas to shape/transform the real world, if not covered by material interests and mighty actors who can push them through, is very limited. They must not

only meet someone's interests and needs, but also have powerful representatives in order to gain traction in the public sphere. As the rise of postcolonial theory in globalized academia reflects the shifts in global economy, so too does the rise of identity politics reflect (expected or feared) shifts within the social structure of Western societies (the same is true for populism, as [Manow 2021](#) shows). When covered by material—i.e., economic or political—power, ideas are not (or no longer) means to compensate for one's own impotence by asserting moral superiority, but a medium for ascending subalterns to articulate claims. Without reflecting the needs of a group and having supporters who have the power to realize them, ideas would just be free-floating hopes, dreams, and wishes—as can be seen in [human rights talk](#).

Understanding ideas as the constitutive element of the social reality in which we live is ideology as defined by [Althusser](#): “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (p. 109). Yet while ideology might justify and rationalize why people have to go to work every day, it does not create the economic situation. As Vivek Chibber in *The Class Matrix* and Søren Mau in *Mute Compulsion* have recently elaborated in detail, ideology—i.e., having the wrong beliefs about the world—is just a minor element in the multicausal explanation of capitalism's stability. Whatever people might think about a given class structure, “they have to participate in the forms of interaction called for by the class structure just to maintain body and soul. A society's class structure is therefore a source of social stability because the social agents are inclined to reproduce it as the precondition for their well-being” ([Chibber 2022: 2](#)). This does not mean that other elements, like violence and ideology—or, as Søren Mau puts it, “coercion and consent, dominance and hegemony, repression and discourse” ([Mau 2021: 4](#))—are completely unimportant. On the contrary. Structural class theory and its emphasis on the independent force of economic structures does not ignore the role of meaning, culture, and identity, nor does it neglect the role of the state—it puts each in its right place.

Identity Is an Individual and Contingent Way to Deal with Material Preconditions

Ideology and culture, for example, play an eminently important role in justifying the class structure. But contrary to the claims of radical democracy theory and poststructuralist theory, they do not alone constitute social and economic structures. From the insight that it is not culture, ideology or discourse, but primarily material interests and economic structures, that are responsible for the stability of unjust class societies, it follows that the critique of false beliefs and prejudices as a source of consent is secondary. Of course, meanings, symbols, concepts, and ideas

play an important role when it comes, for example, to class formation—the transition from a class in itself to a class for itself. But because capitalism reproduces itself through economic necessities regardless of what people may or may not think about them, the economic structures must be seen as an independent power that is—once again—supplemented and reproduced, but not constituted or set up, by culture (for this argument in length, see [Chibber 2022: 29-41](#)). So the whole project of critiquing ideology with the aim of transforming social order is—to break it down—misguided, since it attacks the wrong opponent. It is not the case that people live under the inescapable influence of ideology and therefore act ideologically. The problem is not the lack of reflexivity or knowledge (about economic structures and the roles they imply) nor the active affirmation of an unjust social and economic order. People *do* know, but act as if they do not know because another mindset would not change structures (on consent, coercion, and resignation in this context, see [Chibber 2022: 78–116](#)). The whole poststructuralist account, which claims that institutions and structures are the outcome of contingent discourses and practices, could therefore be interpreted as a regressive movement: retreating to insights about the materialistic character of the social world. Of course, reality is also shaped by language and culture, but language and culture are not spontaneous and autonomous entities floating above the social reality. Since discourses are attached to the society in which they appear, the transformation of thinking, speaking, and acting is blocked by structures that limit the range and contingency of transformations.

From this perspective, identity politics is just another—and contingent—way of dealing with structures. To criticize identity politics is to criticize a society that needs identities (for many reasons).

Welcome back to Reality...

At the same time, we should thank identity politics, since its shrill “[hyperpolitics](#)” has pushed politics beyond the boundaries of the neoliberal paradigm of post-politics. While institutionalized modern party politics pretended to be universal and overcome clientelism by merely speaking in the name of the common good, by simply realizing the public interest, or doing what is necessary because “there is no alternative,” identity politics can be taken (as in radical democracy theory) as the rebirth of the political. This is why it is so often decried as a threat to mature democracy: with identity politics, the argument goes, we get a revival of the overcome and outdated concept of pressure group politics from the early days of democracy—one which, moreover, harms the interest of the general public by insisting on privileges for particular groups. This reproach (although often repeated) is hypocritical. Politics is and has always been—explicitly or implicitly—about interests. Clientelism never disappeared from modern

democratic states. It just took different forms, for instance, pretending particular interests are in the interest of everyone. In this regard, the shameless and direct insistence on individual self-benefit through identity politics must be understood as a sign of progress, since it reveals what politics in a capitalist state has always been: a way to exploit power and get one's hands on public resources. In this respect, identity politics speeds up the "[radical politicization of everything](#)" and is therefore as revolutionary as the bourgeoisie has been. Identity politics has drowned such political illusions as the harmonic or even idyllic ideal of the state as the neutral administrator of the common good "in the icy water of egotistical calculation," as Marx wrote in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

...which Is Misunderstood in Political Terms

At the same time, identity politics and the struggle for (justified) or against (unjustified) privileges remains ideological, since it confounds (material) interests with (immaterial) ideas. Solid and tangible interests are articulated as issues of visibility, inclusion/exclusion, discrimination, domination, participation, recognition, and representation. For this reason, Hannah Arendt is the main reference for identity politics in Germany today. The absolutely understandable and legitimate wish for a societal order in which one could be "different without fear" (Adorno) is articulated in this context not as a call for a profound transformation of our economic system and its foundations in private property, but—following Hannah Arendt—as the (general) right to (particular) rights for specific groups. But with the transposition of human needs into the juridical realm (since identity politics is not just about respect and symbolic gratification, as critics of identity politics often assert), a transformation of the original intention takes place: a material issue is taken as a political problem. This is the reason why the conflicts in the realm of culture wars will go on: because a material problem is shunted into the political sphere, where it cannot be solved and will thus repeat endlessly—at least until we change the material conditions that make such conflicts possible.

III.
FEMINISM, GENDER,
AND LGBT

THE PERSONAL IS PROBLEMATIC: FEMINIST POLITICS, THE POST-TRUTH ERA, AND THE CULTURE WARS

by Shelley Budgeon

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Perhaps no statement is as foundational to Western feminism as “the [personal is political](#).” In the early days of the women’s liberation movement, women were able—by sharing their personal accounts of the sexism they encountered in their daily lives—to critically analyze and understand the systematic nature of patriarchal social structures. Incidents that had previously been discounted as idiosyncratic, isolated, or private were transformed into visible manifestations of gender inequality. Taken collectively, these experiences revealed a truth about oppressive gender relations and established a point of departure for feminist politics.

The personal acquired significant epistemological status in the conjunction of experience, reality, and truth. Campaigns such as #MeToo illustrate how sharing and chronicling personal experience continues to ground highly visible feminist politics, often in the face of resistance to the claims women make about their experiences. In the era of “post-truth” politics, opposition to feminism is materializing in novel forms of repudiation that acquire their force from a set of dynamics presently shaping the social, cultural, and political landscape.

Women’s claims about the sexism they have experienced have become a renewed site of cultural contestation. Not only is the veracity of their claims subjected to intense to public scrutiny, but attempts are also made to *personally* discredit those women who speak out. This is taking place in a context defined by the rise of conservative and authoritarian populist attacks on gender as “ideological” and an animosity toward feminism animated by the claim that society is now biased in favor of women. The phrase “I Believe Her,” which has been used to confront rape myths that seek to undermine victims of sexual violence, simply yet forcefully identifies where the battle lines are being drawn in the gendered politics of the post-truth era.

In this paper, I argue that existing feminist scholarship should be revisited to find strategies for defending women’s experience as a source of critical

knowledge about the workings of patriarchy. To fight against populist anti-feminist claims, these strategies must avoid locating truth within individuals as an unmediated essence or alternatively treating women's claims as one of many competing versions of reality.

The Epistemology of the Personal

Since the women's liberation movement first identified experience as both a source of critical knowledge and the basis for political subjectivity, feminist theory has formalized distinctive [epistemological approaches](#) to justify claims of truth about patriarchal gender relations and the structure of the social world.

[Foundational theories](#) privilege the authoritative perspective of women by arguing that *as women*, they have certain physical, emotional, psychological, and social experiences that give rise to a differential gendered capacity for knowing reality compared to men. Feminine ways of knowing—characterized by emotion, embodiment, and interconnectedness—contrast with the disembodied, dispassionate rationality associated with masculinity. This privileged access to knowledge is rooted in inherently feminine qualities, such the nurturing instinct, or develops out of those social practices that constitute the private sphere, such as caregiving and affective relationality. On this view, taking women's experiences as the point of departure for analysis of social relations therefore gives rise to knowledge that is more objective and perceptive of the nature of reality than that produced by men, who, as a dominant group, cannot see it because they have a vested interest in maintaining their privilege.

By contrast, [anti-foundational approaches](#) dismantle the view that external, objective reality can be known by an autonomous subject who stands outside of the social. Instead, because knowledge emerges from partial social locations, there can be no universal or transhistorical truth. This perspective draws attention to the social relations through which knowledge is produced. That which becomes understood as “true” is the effect of a struggle over the “fixing” of a particular, historically contingent representation of the world. [Postmodern principles](#) have provided feminism with further tools for challenging the kinds of supposedly objective and value-free “truths” that have been produced about women and their role in society but have also required the epistemological status of personal experience as a direct and unmediated way of knowing to be reconsidered.

These approaches are important to revisit because the problem of justifying feminist analyses is particularly salient today. Feminism has acquired mainstream currency through its visible presence across a range of sites,

including global women's marches, campaigns for reproductive rights, and hashtag activism. The centrality of the personal to these campaigns demonstrates the enduring significance of drawing on women's experience as a strategy for connecting the individual with the collective in order to expose the systematic structure of social injustice. Hashtag movements are an example of political acts that work to circulate information about women's experiences on a wider scale and provide a significant counter to the perpetuation of [testimonial injustice](#)—a harm that occurs when a speaker's account is denied credibility and their status as a competent speaker challenged. The visibility of feminism is, however, also fueling the distorted logic of post-truth rhetoric, thereby fostering a climate in which women's claims are met with resistance and outright misogynistic aggression.

The term "post-truth" has become a shorthand descriptor for a series of socio-political transformations that have led to a [reconstruction of norms](#) used to justify knowledge claims. The attachment of value to personal belief over fact-based, objective evidence has led to a form of relativism that demands that perspectives that have limited credence be accorded equal recognition to those with greater factual grounding. Furthermore, post-truth rhetoric calls for authoritative status to be given to "normal" individuals who are incited to speak the "truth" of their own authentic experience, which is valorized as common sense. A suspicion of elites, established authorities, and minority groups is driving this transformation, as these groups are seen to have been granted a [privileged](#) position that they do not deserve.

While experientially based assertions of personal truth have acquired heightened epistemological significance, this feature of the post-truth environment does not extend to claims regarding women's experience of oppression. Their repudiation is driven by anti-feminist sentiment consistent with the logic driving post-truth cultural politics. There is an affinity between [post-truth norms and populism](#), as the latter also rejects the fundamental principles of democratic communication, including fact-based, reasoned debate and tolerance—essential elements of a thriving public sphere in globalized and multicultural societies. Anti-feminist misogyny and toxic masculinity [anchor](#) populist conservatism by providing a focal point for the socio-political anxieties experienced by diverse constituencies. Unification against the perceived threat of gender ideology offers a platform for marshalling broad-based support against liberal progressive perspectives and carrying out a wider [assault](#) on critical knowledge.

Anti-Feminism

Two key components of anti-feminist discourse mobilize populist standpoints and serve to undermine the claims women make regarding gender issues. First is the contention that societies have been reconfigured into “femocracies” that explicitly—and systematically—favor women’s interests over those of men. In this reformulation of gender hierarchy, masculinity is reconstituted as a site of injury ensured by the operation of extensive misandry and the widespread normalization of male victimhood. Second is the assertion that feminism threatens to destabilize the social order by redefining natural sexual difference as socially constructed. This “gender ideology” materializes in a series of reforms, including sexual citizenship debates, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and sex and gender education, all of which are fiercely opposed by anti-gender activists. This [discourse aligns](#) feminism with a perceived “liberal elite” who seek to advance their own interests and consolidate power.

In this narrative, the imposition of gender ideology is not about knowledge but is rather a central plank in a wider plot to seize power and impose deviant, minority values on ordinary people. Anti-gender activists claim they are defending what “normal” people really want—for example, for women to have the “right” to embrace conventional femininity, or for “natural” heterosexual flirtation in the workplace to continue without undue anxiety and confusion about men’s roles. These two components of anti-feminist discourse—that feminism has manufactured a biased system that routinely victimizes men, and that there exists a conspiracy amongst feminism to undermine “natural” gender roles and consolidate power—anchor post-truth populism and create several epistemological problems for the role of personal experience in feminist critique.

Defending Feminist Claims

Foundational epistemologies, which argue that feminine attributes give rise to a differential gendered capacity for knowing reality, and anti-foundational approaches, which emphasize that what is known is a partial “truth,” or one of multiple socially constructed narratives, prove limited due to the ways post-truth knowledge norms operate in conjunction with anti-feminist discourse. The first norm to examine is how the expression of feeling is valorized over rational argument. Populism endorses a set of “[feeling rules](#)” that reformulate the definition of “truth” and encourage people to free themselves from liberal notions of what they *should* feel in order to express what they *actually* feel is their own truth. The presence of deeply felt emotion signals that there is a truth that needs to be told regardless of the dictates of political correctness. This creates a strong sense

of belonging to a like-minded majority driven by an emotive sensation of empowerment.

Within the logic of feeling rules, emotion as a source of truth, is gendered in a wholly different way. No longer feminized, emotion is a resource commanded by masculinity in ways previously unavailable. Therefore, the assertion that emotion, in opposition to male reason, can serve as a foundation for women's claim to know the truth is weakened by the contention that male pain and suffering are expressions of *authentic evidence* that society is now structured by reverse sexism and male disadvantage. This articulation of male victimhood is present across numerous [online spaces](#), such as [antimisandry.com](#), which solicits men to tell their stories of the systematic oppression and hatred they have experienced, while the [#HimToo campaign](#) has sought to redirect concern away from men as perpetrators of harassment and recognize men as the victims of false allegations in sexual harassment cases. In this discourse, men are the “real” victims because they are systematically made vulnerable by a culture that privileges women's claims while silencing men. The consequent depth and intensity of feeling is deployed by many men's rights groups as the basis for making anti-feminist claims and defending misogynist views. Evidently, therefore, in the era of post-truth populism, it is problematic to assert that emotion, as a uniquely feminine capacity, should be afforded epistemic supremacy over masculine rational argument.

Aspects of anti-foundationalist epistemology also prove limited in this context, particularly in relation to the deconstruction of naturalized sexual difference, which is central to feminist theories of gender. In the 1980s [postmodernism](#) provided principles that could be used to critique the vestiges of old patriarchal and imperialist justifications for the white male advantage that was entrenched within Enlightenment ideals. These included the refutation of disinterested objectivity, the rejection of a singular truth, and the recognition that reality is not merely represented by language but constituted through opposing narratives vying for cultural dominance. While for feminism this meant that personal experience could no longer be justified as making a *direct link* to an objective external reality, it did allow for many aspects of the social world previously understood as objective to be rethought as effects of representation. Significantly, naturalized sexual difference was reformulated as a socially constructed ideology that served male interests. Such insights facilitated an anti-establishment critique by revealing a link between power and knowledge.

In [post-truth](#) populism, critiques of the establishment are increasingly expressed by the Right through the co-optation of anti-foundationalist principles once predominantly associated with the Left. This shift involves

a somewhat incongruous appropriation of schools of thought that in the past would have been denounced by the Right as the esoteric domain of an elitist academia, a category into which feminist theory would certainly fall. Many of these principles—chief among them the insight that knowledge, far from being disinterested, is linked to [power](#)—are deployed selectively to advance populist claims.

This is illustrated primarily by the struggle over definitions of gender. Feminist and queer activists radically dislodged the concept of gender from its normative descriptive origins and repurposed the term as an analytical tool that could reveal how “natural” sexual difference was the product of androcentric norms and patriarchal institutions. Anti-gender ideologues now harness the power-knowledge relationship to argue that institutionalized feminism seeks to impose this version of gender, taught in gender studies courses, on average people as part of a conspiracy aimed at seizing power through the imposition of deviant and minority values.

Describing gender as a form of ideological colonization creates the impression that feminism and LGBTQ+ activists are pursuing a consolidation of power at the expense of the status quo. [Anti-gender rhetoric](#) is therefore an epistemological response to emancipatory claims about sex, gender, and sexuality, as well as a political strategy used to limit associated policy developments. Where feminist epistemology once argued that the perspective of the powerful could not be objective because of self-interest, anti-gender activists now turn this logic against the femocracy.

Defending Feminist Critique

While post-truth culture is riven by deeply felt disagreement about what can be said, what can be known, and the relative status of competing claims, feminist epistemology must continue to put forward a defense of women’s personal experiences, upon which feminist political action is based. Although problematic for the reasons explored here, it remains the case that personal experiences patently reveal something significant about the gendered structure of daily life that otherwise would not be understood. For feminism, the enduring [epistemological status](#) given to the conjunction of personal experience, reality, and truth can be made defensible by implementing well-developed, longstanding theoretical frameworks developed by feminist theorists that allow for sophisticated critical analysis of the gender order. Therefore, notwithstanding claims that the reversal of sexism is producing a state of male victimhood or that feminism is pursuing an ideological conspiracy via sex education programs—which have an inflection distinctive to the emergence of post-truth politics—the task for feminist theory remains unchanged. For that reason, and in conclusion, it

is useful to revisit existing feminist scholarship to map a way through the post-truth populist landscape.

Long before the term “post-truth” entered our vocabulary, feminism had already developed a critique of the essentialist tendencies associated with arguments for distinctly feminine ways of knowing on the grounds that these can lead to the assumption that truth is located within individuals as an [unmediated essence](#). This problem is now central to ways post-truth norms operate. When personal experience is taken at face value as giving direct and unmediated access to truth, there is no way to evaluate the claims being made; truth is that which the individual directly feels and experiences as reality. By adopting poststructuralist principles, feminism moved the emphasis away from the specific attributes of the person making a knowledge claim—as in feminine ways of knowing—to the question of what can be known. This strategy draws attention to the act of knowing as a social process mediated by socio-cultural factors while avoiding the excessive relativism that results when multiple versions of the social world are treated as equal but different perspectives. Following on from this insight, cognition—or the *act* of knowing—may be analyzed as a [human practice](#) that is theoretically mediated.

In this approach, personal [experience](#) remains central to feminism’s claims—not as the authoritative origin of “truth,” but as that which we seek to explain by means of reason, evidence, and fact-based analysis. This framing identifies a course that may be charted between dismissing experience as unable to produce perfect knowledge, on the one hand, and saying that experience can only tell us various stories, on the other hand. When feminist critique takes women’s experience as a starting point for its analysis of the social world, the legitimacy and value of these accounts rests upon the capacity of feminist theory to explain the structure of social relations, to develop robust analyses that expose the weaknesses of alternative interpretations, and to debate arguments that oppose feminist positions. Its force comes not from a privileged standpoint, but from the strength of rational argument and a systematic demonstration of the deficiencies of alternative explanations.

In a “post-fact” world, feminist theory disputes contested claims about gender relations—such as the view that society is increasingly institutionally biased against men due to femocratic dominance—by responding with a systematic argument based upon facts. Unlike “truths” that are defended by a set of “feeling rules,” which uphold claims because they are authentically experienced as true, “a fact is a theoretically constituted proposition, supported by theoretically mediated evidence and put forward as part of a [theoretical formulation](#) of reality.”

The frameworks developed by feminist scholars allow us to understand how experience is produced and, moreover, allow for the critical assessment of specific experiences as a [response to relativism](#). For instance, when allegations are made, as in the case of sexual misconduct, the victim's account is likely to be partial. Human cognition is unavoidably so. Yet the impossibility of transcending our social location does not mean that we cannot establish objective grounds for adjudicating claims. It does not mean that partial views are inescapably biased or that all partial views must be granted the same status. Some can be found to be false, distorted, or erroneous.

Conclusion

In the climate of post-truth populism, the various contestations that emerge around gender issues are struggles over different types of knowledge and truths in a world where mobilization against feminism is serving as a focus for disparate groups who stand, more generally, in opposition to liberal values, democratic norms, and multicultural diversity. The project of feminist theory is to continue to provide tools to analyze the conditions under which "truth" can be claimed—not because truth arises out of unmediated personal experience or because all versions of reality matter, but because the claims that can be made (and that which can be known) continue to be a social process that is theoretically mediated.

DID THE WOKE MOVEMENT HIJACK FEMINISM IN POLAND?

by Magdalena Grzyb

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The current anti-abortion law in Poland is one of the harshest not only in Europe, but also in the world. Since 2020, when the Constitutional Court ruled abortion on the basis of fetal defect unconstitutional, it has been illegal to terminate a pregnancy in any situation except for when a pregnancy resulted from a crime or represents a threat to a woman's health and life. Nevertheless, the main axis of the culture war and ideological dispute in Poland is not about women's rights but about LGBTQ+ rights. This situation has partly hijacked feminist claims—especially in relation to abortion, a critical issue in Poland—subordinating the latter to the LGBTQ+ agenda. That same LGBTQ+ agenda has largely focused on the issue of gender self-identification, pushing the question of equal rights for Polish gay citizens (for instance, the right to marriage) onto the back burner.

Female Gender

For 30 years after the fall of communism, during which time the state was ideologically subordinated to the Catholic Church, a woman was not a woman, but a mother. A mother to her children, a potential mother to an unborn child, and a symbolic/social mother to the poor and those in need of care. In his encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II (a Pole revered in Poland as a saint and credited with overthrowing the communist regime) described the vocation of motherhood, whether biological or spiritual, as both justifying and giving meaning to a woman's existence.

The conservative ideology of family values appealed to many women for two reasons. First, people tend to define themselves by their relationships and family bonds. For centuries, the ideology of patriarchy has reduced women to just that: being someone's mother, daughter, wife or sister. Second, in a reality in which existing social structures were being shaken (by the collapse of communism, economic crisis, rising unemployment, neoliberal policies, and sudden social change), the family and family ties were seen by many as the only safe refuge and enduring structure (next to the Catholic Church) in an uncertain and changing world. And, as is well known, male domination and oppression of women would not have been

possible throughout history without the cooperation of the dominated (i.e., women) themselves.

However, women are also treated instrumentally among progressives, the Left, and the LGBTQ+ movement. They are supposed to support all marginalized groups in their struggle and surround them with care and empathy. In a nutshell, they are supposed to be their “moms.” Beyond individually supporting those in need, the entire feminist movement is expected to focus on the [emancipation](#) of various marginalized groups, not just women. In the Polish context, there is a particular focus on the LGBTQ+ community and transgender women, as they are perceived as the most vulnerable.

[Feminism is for everyone, not only for women](#), say feminists. For instance, the grant-provider Feminist Fund supports not only women and girls, but also nonbinary, intersex, trans, and queer people. A transactivist on the feminist website [CodziennikFeministyczny.pl](#) (Daily Feminist) says [feminism should be trans-inclusive or dead](#). It seems women are not to think only of themselves, but to care for others, sometimes at the expense of their own rights and interests. They are also supposed to discipline women who break with this typically female role. This explains why it is often those women who consider themselves feminists who are involved in the woke movement and eagerly attack those women who defend women’s sex-based rights by labeling them as transphobes, [as seen](#) in the mediatized case of *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling.

This is also what happened in Poland after 2020. It was women’s rights that suffered the most from post-1989 neoliberal and conservative policies, of which the revocation of women’s right to terminate pregnancies is the most vivid example. The abortion debate has undoubtedly represented the main axis of ideological conflict in recent years. Nevertheless, as political and cultural polarization has escalated, the LGBTQ+ issue has taken over women’s rights, pushing women to focus on the former and not the latter.

Polish Feminism

Poland has never been a country with a strong feminist movement or mass feminist consciousness. During the communist period (1945-1989), women were relatively equal in the labor market and education; they could take jobs on their own, get divorced, have their own savings, and—from 1956—legally terminate pregnancies due to personal hardship. Yet feminist consciousness was not very high.

The feminist movement [began](#) to form only after 1989, with the political transformation and under the influence of two forces. On the one hand,

the introduction of liberal democracy meant opening up to the West and being influenced by cultural and ideological trends coming from Western countries (especially the US), such as neoliberal ideology and the liberal current of feminism (American scholarship on feminism tends to be ignorant of feminist literature from outside the Anglosphere).

On the other hand, the collapse of communism and the formation of a new ideological and moral order entailed a drastic curtailment of women's rights in the form of the 1993 abortion ban dictated by the Catholic Church—essentially to please Pope John Paul II—and the general promotion of the ideology of family values, which had a regressive effect on women's emancipation. The so-called [abortion compromise](#) entailed banning abortion (the woman was not punished, only the doctor performing the procedure and all who aided her) with three exemptions: in situations of risk to the life or health of a pregnant woman; if a pregnancy resulted from rape; and in situations of severe and irreversible fetal defect or incurable illness.

With the exception of a 1996 attempt to liberalize the anti-abortion law—which was impeded by the Constitutional Court, led by conservative Catholic Andrzej Zoll—for the next 20 years, there was no political will to liberalize the legislation. On the contrary, there were many attempts to tighten it further.

Everything changed in 2015 when the Law and Justice Party (Pol. *Pravo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), an ultra-conservative and populist party, came to power. In 2016, following [mass protests](#) (the so-called Black Protest), the party withdrew from proceeding with a law that would have further restricted access to abortion. This was seen as an awakening of feminist consciousness among Polish women and the beginning of a social movement to liberalize the anti-abortion law. As it turned out, however, that assumption was premature and overstated.

Four years later, in October 2020, in the midst of a wave of COVID-19, the Polish Constitutional Court (the composition of which is [controversial](#) and even unrecognized by the opposition, as well as by some legal scholars and high-profile lawyers) issued a judgment declaring the embryopathological exemption from the abortion ban unconstitutional. Mass protests again erupted across the country. However, while such protests can influence legislators or the government to change laws, they are unlikely to have the power to alter constitutional court rulings. With this verdict, the marionette Constitutional Court bailed out the ruling party, allowing it to tighten the anti-abortion law in a somewhat irrevocable way. The protests could not produce a change in the verdict.

The 2020 protests marked the first time that the right to terminate a pregnancy was conceived of as something other than women's reproductive rights. The queer campaigners who dominated women's-rights NGOs in Poland began to promote slogans about abortion for "people with uteruses." Some women associated with the left who reflexively stood up for the word "woman," like [Kaya Szulczewska](#) and [Urszula Kuczynska](#), were met with ostracism and cancellation.

Pro-abortion activism became subjugated to the queer agenda and subsumed by the LGBTQ+ movement. This was very tellingly articulated in a January 2021 [interview](#) of two queer and pro-sex-work activists (these movements are conflated in the Polish context), who said that during the abortion protests, "queers and sex workers took to the streets first." Since the protests erupted [spontaneously](#) across the country and were neither initiated nor coordinated by any queer or pro-sex-work organizations or activists, this obvious untruth exemplifies the creation of a narrative about the leadership role of these circles in the fight for women's reproductive rights in Poland.

Margot's Remand

Looking back, one can tell that the key moment that ushered in not only the end of feminism as a movement for women's rights, but also the cancellation of people for their views and the end of freedom of speech among "liberals" or the opposition was the detention of LGBTQ+ activist Margot in August 2020.

Margot was a young person who identified as non-binary and moved in anarchist circles. As Margot has expressed being comfortable with [any pronoun](#), I use here the pronoun of his sex at birth, "he." In August 2020, Margot was detained by police for destroying a pro-life movement van that was driving around Warsaw and attacking its driver. The incident took place a few weeks before the arrest, giving rise to speculation that the authorities had a political purpose in this spectacular detention and that it was even a political provocation aimed at discrediting the LGBTQ+ movement in the eyes of conservative citizens. [Footage of the act](#) of destroying the van and assaulting the driver shows Margot as a tall, aggressive male, yet the progressive public raised an uproar that he would be placed in male detention and would—as a non-binary, transgender person—have horrifying things happen to him.

The case received a lot of international attention. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovic, called on Poland to ["immediately release" Michal Sz. aka "Margo,"](#) while dozens of prominent intellectuals [signed a letter launched by Nobel Prize-winner Olga](#)

[Tokarczuk](#) to “end homophobia” in Poland. Such a high level of public outrage may have been partly the result of Margot being mistakenly identified as his female partner Lania (Eng. Doe), as most press materials used a photo of them together. People thought that a woman was being placed in male detention just for saying she was nonbinary.

Despite the fact that at no time did Margot say that he felt he was a woman at the time of his detention, LGBTQ+ activists and politicians said it was literal [violence](#) and [“destroying people.”](#) Thus, the entire democratic and liberal part of public opinion tacitly accepted the assumption that someone’s gender is determined only by mere self-identification, [“each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender,”](#) i.e., how someone feels at any given moment in their life.

Speaking of Margot in the feminine form has even become a war paint of the moral and political side of the struggle. The feminine form was used by Ombudsman Adam Bodnar, as well as all the lawyers and politicians who stood up for Margot, not to mention journalists. Anyone who spoke of Margot in the masculine form was unequivocally and immediately considered an enemy of LGBTQ+ communities and their struggles, a homophobe, or a PiS supporter. The director of the new New World radio station (Radio Nowy Świat) Piotr Jedliński, who makes a living from fundraising, [was forced to resign](#) when he questioned Margot’s gender.

Similarly, the nomination of radio journalist Beata Lubecka, who interviewed Margot, for the Grand Press award sparked an outcry among the LGBTQ+ community and their allies. Although Lubecka used she/her pronouns to refer to Margot during the interview, the activists and some progressive journalists said she behaved inappropriately and should have been condemned rather than praised. The contest jury, unable to revoke the announced nomination, [decided not to award the prize in that category at all](#). The Radio ZET editor-in-chief announced that the station would conduct training sessions for their journalists on inclusivity and proper language regarding LGBTQ+ people.

Getting back to Margot, he was released by the court after three weeks. He came out as a hero, even if he was held in a separate cell the whole time and enjoyed attention and care from staff and human rights activists. He also raised approximately \$100,000 in public fundraising for further activities and gender transition, which it seems he actually [never underwent](#). In a 2020 [interview](#), Margot said that he became non-binary and changed his name from Michał to Małgorzata (aka Margot) in 2017 as a result of reading Bourdieu’s book *Masculine Domination*. In November 2021 he presented himself as an agender person.

The Woke Awakening

The story of Margot's detention and the unrest of LGBTQ+ activists that evening (called Rainbow Night) made Margot the idol of teenagers who, in discovering their gender identities, began to express personal rebellion against the established world order as well as political rebellion against the PiS regime. It also solidified the LGBTQ+ movement's position as the ideological hegemon and leader in the dispute with the Law and Justice Party. The rainbow flag became a symbol of political resistance against PiS and all the values it represents, including moral conservatism and the Catholic Church.

With this, Polish feminism—both activist and academic—has been “taken over” by queer theory, whether through personal ties and social relationships or because grant providers have begun to make grants conditional on adopting ["inclusivity" policies](#) and embracing all ["historically marginalized communities."](#)

This swift colonization of the feminist movement by LGBTQ+ activists has contributed to the narrative that now only queers are really standing up for abortion—which is no longer for women, but for ["people with uteruses."](#) The 2017 abortion law liberalization [project](#) of feminist and leftist circles was called "Save the Women." A [draft](#) from 2021 already had the neutral name "Legal abortion without compromise" and used the term “pregnant person” instead of “woman.”

The queer agenda has hijacked 30 years of struggle for the right to abortion and associated it with gender self-identification advocacy. In 2022, the only “legitimate” feminism professed by feminist organizations, academics or online influencers is transfeminism. Women activists [tweet](#) "abortion and transition on demand" and any woman who expresses an objection to the queer agenda is cast out as transphobic. Women labeled as "trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs)" are denied the right to speak in public spaces on any topic (for example, Ursula Kuczynska, despite being a nuclear expert, cannot speak on this subject). Efforts are even made to silence them in the academy, as with the attempt to cancel my lecture on femicide at Jagiellonian University in December 2021.

The Most Marginalized and Persecuted Minority

The LGBTQ+ movement has managed to build an image for itself as the minority most persecuted and discriminated against by the Law and Justice Party. But it has been women who have had their rights deceitfully curtailed: their right to decide whether to give birth to sick and handicapped children has been taken away. It has been specific professional groups, such as

judges, against whom organized campaigns of vilification and hatred have been carried out, not to mention personal persecution of individual judges: suspending them from work, depriving them of their income, initiating criminal proceedings, wiretapping their conversations, and harassing them.

Yet the LGBTQ+ movement, using such statements by politicians as President Andrzej Duda's claim during the 2020 presidential campaign that "LGBT is not people, it's an ideology" or an LGBTQ+ activist's nailing of "LGBT-free zone" placards under the names of provincial towns, has built for itself the image of the most persecuted minority.

The anti-"LGBT-free zone" campaign involved a sort of "public shaming" of municipalities whose councils adopted two kinds of resolutions: those in support of [family rights](#) and those "against LGBT ideology." The resolutions did not use the term "LGBT-free zones" and by no means entailed banning LGBT people from these areas. The so-called Family Rights Charter (a family rights resolution authored by the ultra-conservatist think tank Ordo Iuris) did not mention LGBTQ+ people at all, instead mainly quoting provisions from the Polish Constitution on the protection of family, marriage, and parents' rights to bring up children. Some "anti-LGBT ideology" resolutions were later [overturned by the courts](#) on the grounds of inconsistency with Polish law or failing to provide an exact definition of the vague term "LGBT ideology."

Such a narrative completely ignores the fact that homosexuals, even in Poland, most often belong to economically and socially privileged groups. They are residents of large cities, are educated, and often work in prestigious professions. A [2003 study](#) found that 75% of them earned above the national average. Representatives of these groups have access to public media, and social tolerance of homosexuality has been [growing](#) continuously since the early 2000s.

An LGBTQ+ Woke Despotism?

Questioning those demands of the trans movement that are in conflict with women's rights exposes anyone to accusations of sowing hatred, on par with the actions of ultra-conservative politicians of the ruling party.

When in late 2020 and early 2021 *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the country's largest newspaper and opposition medium, published interviews with feminists defending the word "woman," it was accused of transphobia. An unnamed "LGBT Lobby" organization issued [a letter of dissent](#) signed by more than 1,000 people and more than a dozen queer and LGBTQ+ organizations. The publication of these texts (seen as an example of "bias-motivated speech" right up there with local governments' anti-LGBT resolutions and

statements by Law and Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro) was cited by ILGA Europe in their [annual report](#) as proof that Poland is the most homophobic and transphobic country in Europe (p. 111).

The Polish LGBTQ+ movement's focus on the issue of gender identity at the expense of the rights of homosexuals, which has been observed since Margot's case in 2020, is utterly paradoxical because Poland, unlike Western countries, has so far failed to win the movement's basic demand, namely the legalization of same-sex unions (whether marriages or registered partnerships). This demonstrates, in my opinion, the movement's imitation of trends and political goals coming from [the West](#) rather than an agenda based on a real recognition of the problems of Polish gay citizens.

LGBTQ+ as the New Religion of Liberal Elites in a Catholic Country?

The fact that the LGBTQ+ movement, its goals and methods has been imported from the West is also pointed out by Warsaw University sociologist Michał Łuczewski, who has called [LGBT the "new religion"](#) that Polish liberal and metropolitan elites have adopted from the West to distinguish themselves from Poland's "Catholic parochialism" and backwardness.

The culture war in Polish society is now between the "Catholic parochial" and the enlightened elite for whom the rainbow symbolizes an open society. The rainbow has a much broader meaning than just the LGBTQ+ movement; it represents progress and liberation from the power of the omnipotent and morally corrupt Church, family, and patriotic-national traditions and values (which have been promoted in a distorted way by Law and Justice). As in the US, LGBTQ+ in Poland has become an elitist ideology. And for the younger generation, it has even become the "[moral center of Polishness](#)."

Łuczewski argues that uncritical acceptance of LGBTQ+ demands is supposed to give the Polish liberal elite the moral capital that will make Western elites accept them. The queer version of LGBTQ+ has become an ideology that legitimizes the elite as good citizens who will lead Poland out of Eastern backwardness and toward European universality and rationality.

Many of the features of the movement's queer version do indeed look like a new secular religion. This is especially true of such features as the zealotry of LGBTQ+ movement members and allies, such as the creation of rituals and acts of faith; confessions; the [legitimization of violence against opponents](#); the sacralization of concepts like the notion of gender identity, which is deceptively similar to the notion of the metaphysic Catholic soul;

the exclusion of heretics (i.e., gay or transsexual people who express critical opinions or who do not like queer aesthetics, as well as lesbians who oppose the deconstruction of the category of “woman”), and who are deemed [worse](#) than open enemies; the creation of a pantheon of new LGBT saints or even martyrs like Margot or the young non-binary person Milo, who committed suicide. All this is deceptively reminiscent of the Catholic religion *à rebours* in its fundamentalist version.

Such a take also explains why the “LGBTQ+ religion” has so quickly taken hold in a country as Catholic as Poland. Women and their rights, as in Catholicism, are to be subordinated to higher goals. Women are to serve the LGBTQ+ movement as faithful allies. Of primary importance is to appeal to their maternal feelings as mothers of trans children or young gay men, since in the popular perception, the fight for “T” is indistinguishable from the fight for the rights of “L” and “G.” In order not to hurt the feelings of a few people who do not feel like women, women and feminist organizations voluntarily give up defining themselves as women and become “people with uteruses” or “pregnant people.” Just as for the right there are no women, but only mothers, so too for the left, there are no women, but only “persons with uteruses.”

Conclusion

In Poland in 2022, the culture war is in full swing and social polarization is growing. The two sides of the dispute are more similar than they are different. The extreme right and the extreme cultural left are alike in their instrumental views of women. Where the right uses the law to criminalize offenses against religious feelings, the left and liberals demand that the offense of gender feelings be [criminalized](#) in the form of punishment for transphobia and misgendering. Where the right wants to reduce women to the role of wives and mothers and force them to give birth to sick and handicapped children, the left proposes that “pregnant people” be allowed abortion on demand almost until the 9th month of pregnancy; supports giving birth to children for money (surrogacy); advocates “sex work” as [an attractive career option](#); sees pornography as a [desirable model of sexuality](#); and calls for transition on demand for anyone who does not match his/her gender.

We seem to have arrived at a time when conservative oppression of women is not much different from progressive oppression of women. Both are founded on the commodification of female sexuality, which is subordinated to superior forces—the state, the religious system, ideologies, or the logic of capitalism—all of which are made for male profit and pleasure.

The abortion debate around women's right to decide if and when to become a mother best highlights how women differ from men and how biology affects lives and social position. In 2001, Agnieszka Graff, one of Poland's most popular academic feminists, wrote that in the dispute over the right to abortion, "we lost the war over language." The anti-woman Catholic right and their rhetoric of protecting the unborn won. For 30 years, there were no women, there were only "mothers" and unborn children. Today, Polish feminists are surrendering by default in another war over language and their subjectivity by renouncing being women and becoming "people with uteruses."

Just as women acting within—and quietly leading—Solidarity overthrew communism and "won" the ultra-Catholic anti-women democracy that took away our rights (as described by [Shana Penn](#)), now women are acting in the LGBTQ+ movement, which wants—on the backs of women and the fight for abortion rights—to win solutions that will result in the disappearance of women as a subject of political rights.

BETWEEN WARRING PARTIES: CULTURE WARS OVER LGBT+ EQUALITY

by Malte Breiding

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The concept of culture wars is at once appealing and unsatisfactory on many counts. On the one hand, there is no denying that an increasing and antagonistic logic of us vs. them (or them vs. them, if you prefer) pervades political debate—especially when it comes to “controversial” and emotionally invested topics such as LGBT+ rights. Thus, any attempt to provide a critical commentary on the deployment of the concept inevitably runs into empirical stumbling blocks: How can one deny that the political climate concerning LGBT+ rights is principally characterized by two opposed camps?

In that sense, I echo Rico Isaacs in his [piece](#), in which he argues that culture wars, as a concept, make almost instinctive sense and are impossible to overlook. Not least, it is difficult to circumvent culture wars as a political phenomenon, inasmuch as they are a rhetorical style that seems to be sponsored by “progressives” and “conservatives” alike—so much so that one wonders whether such antagonistic deadlocks are the envisioned endpoint of the democratic conversation. On the other hand, and still in line with Isaacs’ argument, I find the concept of culture wars to have little analytical or normative purchase—at least if deployed on its own. The concept not only simplifies and distorts reality, but also seems to end up reproducing—rather than seeking to interrogate and transform—those hostile relations that are so derogatory to a healthy democratic society.

In what follows, I will briefly introduce the approach from which I draw inspiration, which stems from the philosopher Jacques Derrida and the political theorist Ernesto Laclau, with further development by Lasse Thomassen, before providing a few examples of its merits.

The Who’s Who and Everything in Between

In public debate, pop culture, and academic research alike, a certain fetishization of Self/Other relations is apparent. In public debate and pop culture, heroes and victims are opposed to villains and scapegoats. In some strands of—especially poststructuralist—research, the analysis of political discourses often aims to uncover (potentially problematic) us/them

relations. On the one hand, this kind of research most often seeks to highlight that such binaries are both normatively and empirically questionable, thereby pointing to something beyond such simplified representations of reality. On the other hand, one should be careful not to overemphasize the uncovering of us/them discursive constructions, letting antagonism and difference be the only reported result of the analysis. Thus, while most people would agree that such binaries are simplified representations of reality, they nevertheless bear a strong degree of public and scholarly investment.

A very simple example will illustrate the shortcomings of such binaries: Imagine that you enter a classroom and ask the students to split up into two groups according to whether they are, say, upper-class or lower-class, patriot or foreigner, heterosexual or homosexual, military supporter or pacifist. What you would most likely see is an uncertainty among a small group of students about where to place themselves. These students might argue that they do not belong to either, or that it would be to simplify their self-perception and identity to choose one of the groups. What would happen to those who could or would not place themselves in one of the two groups? You would either have to force them to choose a category or they would have to disengage from the exercise in order for you to end up with a perfectly dualistic grouping. In effect, their exclusion is what makes the exercise possible in the first place as well as what makes it fail in the end.

If we take this to the realm of politics, it is not unusual to see political discourses drawing such distinctions between the “good” and the “bad,” “us” and “them.” But these oppositional pairs, also called antagonisms, are never able to neatly sort and represent everyone. Such a representation of reality will ultimately fail by producing remainders. What happens in such discourses? Those people or phenomena that cannot effectively be subsumed under the heading of one of the antagonistic poles will become what in Poststructuralist Discourse Theory is termed *heterogenous*. Heterogeneity refers to what escapes the logic of inside/outside, us/them—that is, “an excess [escaping the attempt to discursively objectify the boundaries of identities](#)” (p. 43).

I believe that a research program that seeks to account for so-called culture wars concerning such issues as LGBT+ rights *as well as* all those examples of heterogeneity that seem to call simple us-vs.-them depictions of reality into question holds immense value if we are to properly understand, transform, and reimagine the undeniable antagonisms that characterize democratic debate.

Homonationalism, Queer Ideology, and the Case of Denmark

In a recent article published in *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* entitled “[Between Two Ills](#),” I sought to uncover the way in which homonationalism, as [theorized by Jasbir Puar](#), might, following the assumptions found in [the political theory of Chantal Mouffe](#), come to fuel negative, even hostile, attitudes toward the feminist and LGBT+ movements. In short, when LGBT+-friendly attitudes are made an emblematic symbol of the Danish nation and national belonging as such, a demarcation between the pro-LGBT+ citizen and the anti-LGBT+ citizen is established. This us/them relation, this moment of exclusion of those who do not unconditionally support or identify with the pro-LGBT+ image of the nation, can potentially become a breeding ground for negative sentiments toward LGBT+ organizations, which are seen to represent the interests of sexual and gender minorities.

In 2018, seven Evangelical Christian organizations pushed back against the then center-right government in Denmark for propagating so-called “queer ideology” through its recently published *LGBTI Action Plan*. The “queer ideology” was, more or less, given the same features as we are seeing political leaders and anti-gender movements around the world ascribe to the infamous “gender ideology.” However, a few weeks later, during Copenhagen Pride Week, the debate took a new turn. The former Prime Minister of Denmark, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, gave a speech that was interpreted by the Christian organizations to exclude them from the image of a “proper Dane”:

For me, Copenhagen Pride is a manifestation. For freedom, liberal-mindedness, and community. A message to every corner of Denmark. Every part of Europe. Every area of the world. That [...] we here in this country object—as in, completely—to forces that want the stock-conservative view of human nature of the past. That we in our society—our country—stand together for [the right to be who one is](#).

In the LGBTI Action Plan, as well as during Copenhagen Pride Week, the former government made it clear that sexual and gender minorities, especially those with an ethnic minority background, were the ones suffering from such a “stock-conservative view of human nature of the past.” Nevertheless, it was the Christian organizations who reacted. They decried their exclusion from the demos and ascribed it to the effects of the “queer ideology” that they believed originated with the feminist and LGBT+ organizations. An example of such a critique is provided by Hans Ole Bækgaard, the chairman of one of the organizations, Indre Mission:

When the Prime Minister in connection with Copenhagen Pride says that in this country one objects to forces that want the stock-conservative view of human nature of the past, then I must assume that the Prime Minister refers to a person such as me. That I have a stock-conservative view of human nature when I want to maintain that there is something called man and woman. [...] It is problematic that I must experience not being able to count myself as a real Dane and someone who does not want our society because [I do not agree with what the Prime Minister was talking about.](#)

Through the analysis performed in the aforementioned article, I showed that the ensuing public debate indeed supported the theoretical thesis that homonationalism holds the potential to fuel negative attitudes toward the LGBT+ movement. This is a critique not of pro-LGBT+ politics as such, but of how the latter can have adverse effects when inscribed within an exclusionary, nationalist formula. The theory of homonationalism is already an important critique of how the pro-LGBT+ nation is constructed by othering the (allegedly) homo- and transphobic attitudes of racial, cultural, and religious others, most often Muslims. In the shimmering light of “gay and trans rights” we must interrogate those instances when pro-LGBT+ politics parading as a progressive consensus are used to condemn, exclude, ridicule, draw borders, legitimize war, etc. This only reproduces a culture war rationality based on (racialized) stereotypes.

More to the point, when it comes to the aims of “Between Two Ills,” pro-LGBT+ politics can end up having counterproductive effects when the image of LGBT+ rights becomes associated with moralizing, nationalistic or otherwise exclusionary political practices. This is a call to remain attentive to the implications for those we mean to protect when pro-LGBT+ politics joins forces with exclusionary forms of nationalism, security, neoliberalism, capitalism or Eurocentrism.

This is not only a normative matter, but also has important implications for the analytical value of the culture wars concept. One implication that follows from such an analysis is that the simple us-vs.-them, progressive-vs.-conservative, pro-vs.-anti-LGBT+ distinction becomes troubled. What is perceived by many, and to a large extent rightly so, as a positive instance of the central political power embracing sexual and gender minorities ends up producing counter-productive effects that cannot be properly captured within a culture wars framework.

This is not a matter of categorizing politicians—using a homonationalist or otherwise exclusionary and moralistic discourse—as “the bad guys” instead of the “good guys,” but of realizing that the potentially negative effects of championing LGBT+ rights in such a register cannot be characterized unequivocally as “progressive.” Thus, I would argue that the effects of such an (unhappy) marriage of pro-LGBT+ stances and nationalist rhetoric may be an example of a heterogenous excess that eludes the former government’s attempt to objectify the boundaries of its identity as pro-LGBT+, to paraphrase Thomassen.

Rather than being a somewhat harmless instance of anti-gender opposition by a marginal Christian minority in Denmark, one could argue that it made “the general public more conscious of certain concepts and of their alleged dangers, serving as the scaffolding of a larger movement” (p. 125). Even more importantly, there has since been an increase in politicians and political parties on the right adopting the same anti-gender rhetorical strategy to thwart attempts to deepen and extend rights to sexual and gender minorities in Denmark, as well as to challenge the legitimacy of gender, anti-racist, migration, and queer research(ers). The importance of attending to the heterogenous excess of homonationalism, or pro-LGBT+ consensus more generally, thus should not be understated. While there is little doubt that the public debate principally takes the form of an us-vs.-them relationship, thereby supporting the “culture war” characterization, an analysis of the emergence of the Christian organizations’ contestation and the effects of homonationalist discourse for the LGBT+ organizations, as well as the degree to which LGBT+ people themselves identify with a homonationalist agenda, paint another picture.

An EU Culture War over LGBT+ Rights?

This picture is not devoid of anything resembling a culture war. I am, therefore, not disagreeing with the value of analyzing how public debate or entire societies are conditioned by an us-vs.-them binary. The problem arises if we stop the analysis there. Something or someone escapes this simplistic inside/outside logic—what I have referred to as heterogeneity. And the values we sometimes inadvertently ascribe to one or the other camp (progressive, conservative, right, wrong, etc.) are never as simple a story as they might appear.

I would contend that we are currently witnessing a similarly problematic perception of the political struggle taking place in the European Union concerning LGBT+ rights and freedoms. It is well established in the literature that the European Union has positioned itself as a pro-LGBT+ Union. Similarly to what we saw in the above example of Danish homonationalism, the EU promotes and enforces an EU identity informed

by positive attitudes toward LGBT+ equality—against various concrete and imagined Others (see, for example, [Eigenmann 2022](#); [Kulpa 2014](#); [Paternotte 2019](#); [Slootmaeckers 2020](#); [Thiel 2020](#)).

In recent years, the image of an LGBT+-friendly Union has been challenged by opposition from political leaders in Hungary and Poland as well as growing anti-gender sentiments, which view the promotion of various sexual, women's, and LGBT+ rights as representing an authoritarian and ideological threat to society. Critics have singled out “Brussels” as the author of such a gender ideology through gender and LGBT+ mainstreaming. This has met with extensive critique from the European Commission, most recently in the Commission's *LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025* and in President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen's State of the European Union Address in 2020. Further, in June 2021, the Commission launched infringement procedures against Hungary and Poland for violations of the fundamental rights of LGBT+ people, and in July 2022, the Commission referred Hungary to the EU's Court of Justice over the Hungarian Children Protection Act.

One might argue that this tense political situation could be characterized as a culture war between Eastern and Western EU countries, between traditional family values and LGBT+ equality. According to this depiction, the Commission, along with MEPs and Member States, are at (culture) war with the supposedly homo- and transphobic political leaders of Central and Eastern European member states and their supporters. What is wrong, both empirically and normatively, with this depiction?

As we have already established, this dualistic representation papers over the “fissures” and contradictions. The point is neither to deny nor to support the horrific implications of scaling back freedom and equality for sexual and gender minorities. The point is that, precisely because of the importance of this issue, we should deploy an analytical framework that allows us to ask critical questions that put into perspective and are able to reveal the contradictions in the “good guy vs. bad guy” representation, such as:

1. How does the “progressive” reaction by the Commission, as well as the declared pro-LGBT+ identity of the European Union, play a part in fueling negative sentiments toward sexual and gender minorities and the EU itself? That is, in what ways does a Homo-European discourse draw internal and external symbolic borders, boundaries, and distinctions—and what are the implications thereof? I am personally far from convinced that moralizing about the proper European values is the best way to circumvent further alienation and negative sentiments toward sexual and gender

minorities. On the contrary, it could end up fanning the anti-Brussels, anti-LGBT+ flames, which politicians and movements can capitalize upon and instrumentalize.

2. To what extent are the pro-LGBT+ camp of EU institutions, member states, and MEPs really embracing pro-LGBT+ equality in their own countries and agendas—especially when compelled to balance such concerns with other interests? That is, do the “progressive” countries invest the same energy in ensuring better living conditions, rights, and equality for sexual and gender minorities “at home” as they do in making sure that the EU “dark horses” do?
3. To what extent does the pro-LGBT+ camp in the European Union and its policies represent the LGBT+ movement, when we take into account that sexual and gender minorities embody many lines of stratification and political convictions? As [has been highlighted by feminist researchers](#), among others, the EU can be characterized as a neoliberal project, which affects how ideals such as rights, equality, tolerance, and inclusion are understood and translated into policy. One could question whether all sexual and gender minorities identify with a pro-LGBT+ discourse that stresses the self-ownership of the individual for the purposes of being fit for the market.
4. Finally, we should be able to ask the even more difficult question of whether some LGBT+ organizations are inadvertently complicit in supporting a potentially problematic Homo-European discourse—and in what ways they need to buy into such a discourse in order to be heard in political circles.

In other words, is the “culture war” representation true to life?

Without presupposing the answers to all these questions or that they would all put the EU in a bad light, I contend that such questions will not be answered satisfactorily by attending to culture wars without simultaneously paying attention to the heterogeneity that troubles the otherwise homogenous picture of us vs. them. What we know as culture wars are, in that sense, a representation of reality, which it is important to take into account, but which does not tell the full story. It is at the same time present and a distortion that only can be accounted for when taking heterogeneity into consideration. Most importantly, if we do not attend to what escapes the simplified logic of culture wars, we are left with few tools to normatively envision how such culture wars might be transformed down the road.

CULTURE WARS AS A SPEECH ACT: REFLECTING ON CIVILIZATIONAL AND WORLDVIEW DIVIDES IN THE CASE OF CROATIAN ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATIONS

by Tanja Vuckovic Juros

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“I propose to call it a performative sentence...it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something.”
Austin (*How to Do Things with Words*, 1962, p. 6/7)

In the quotation above, the renowned linguist J.L. Austin describes the key aspect of what is today known as a “speech act”: saying the words (e.g., “I promise”) makes the act (e.g., the promise) happen. Although other attendant circumstances are sometimes required (e.g., saying “I do” is an act of marriage only in a legally binding marriage ceremony), the performative sentence is generally intended as an act in itself. “Culture wars” strike me as precisely this type of performative utterance: the goal of saying that something is a “culture war” is to make it so.

Originally popularized by Hunter's influential 1991 book [*Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*](#), which analyzed the rise of the U.S. Christian Right and “moral controversies” as political issues, the term “culture wars” has long found a warm welcome among journalists looking for catchy headlines. Amid the intensified spread of “morality issues” to other parts of the world, it has also recently gained [a second life in academia](#). Others, partly in this series, have already warned of the analytical problems with the concept (“It is a hard concept to operationalize,” [notes Isaacs](#)) and its reductive nature (it “simplifies and distorts reality,” [points out Breiding](#)).

I agree with these objections, and I am uncomfortable using the phrase. What troubles me even more, however, is that I have come to think of “culture wars” as a concept whose main usage is rhetorical and performative: it aims to persuade us that a certain kind of reality exists and then to make it so. This thinking is similar to Breiding's, whose earlier quote ends in an observation that this concept “also seems to end up

reproducing...hostile relations.” In this text, I examine the proposition of “cultural wars” as a speech act through the examples of two of its derivations—concepts that suggest the same type of underlying conflictual binary—that have been used in the context of Croatian anti-gender mobilizations: “civilizational divide” and “worldview divide.”

The “Civilizational Divide” of the 2013 Marriage Referendum

To examine the “civilizational divide,” I draw on a [study I conducted with my colleagues](#) on the rise of anti-gender mobilizations targeting LGBT rights in Croatia, which culminated in the 2013 referendum on a constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a woman and a man. In this study, we note how, together with the framing of LGBT rights as human rights, the protection of LGBT rights in the 2000s—in the period when Croatia began its bid for EU accession—was presented as a civilizational marker that was supposed to show that Croatia belonged to Europe/the “West” and not to the Balkans/the “East.”

This “civilizational divide” between the West (Europe) and the East (the Balkans) has been a sore spot of Croatian cultural identity for a long time. It predates the country’s aspirations to join the EU; indeed, it was an integral element of the nation-building project of the 1990s, when Croatian political elites [used “Balkanism” to construct the boundaries of what the Croats were not](#) in their [return to Europe](#) from socialism.

So when LGBT rights become a political issue in the process of accession to the EU—at the period when the EU had already institutionalized [LGBT rights as central to the European project](#)—it was easy to equate belonging to Europe with the protection of LGBT rights. Accordingly, the activists for LGBT rights invoked the civilizational divide between the European, progressive Croatia and the Balkanic, backwards Croatia at various points in the 2000s. This was also the main rhetorical device employed by opponents of the 2013 marriage referendum. By voting against the amendment, this framing suggested, Croatian citizens could demonstrate that they belonged on the “right side” of the civilizational divide.

A similar framing of the European East-West civilizational divide notoriously backfired in some other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries by feeding [Eurosceptic “defiance”](#) and turning this [\(flawed and problematic\) construct](#) on its head. Instead of being the [source of \(EU\) disciplining](#), the East-West divide—and belonging to the East, not the deviant West—thus became a matter of cultural pride and national sovereignty in such countries as [Poland](#) or [Hungary](#). Following this reification of the “East-West divide,” the debate became less about the issue at hand (i.e., LGBT rights) and more about where you belonged.

This is not quite what happened in Croatia, but only because the “civilizational divide” frame failed to anchor the belonging debate. Instead, the belonging debate converged upon a “worldview divide” (*svjetonazorska podjela*). Previously associated primarily with the political cleavage between right and left (which drew on the [debates on the role of Croatian Nazi collaborators Ustasha and the communist resistance Partisans in World War Two](#)), the concept of a “worldview divide” was successfully appropriated by the referendum initiators and its supporters to indicate a conservative-liberal cleavage on gender and sexuality values.

The Fall of “Civilizational Divide” and the Rise of “Worldview Divide” in the 2013 Marriage Referendum

To understand how this happened, an important difference between Croatia and many other CEE countries that [embraced anti-EU rhetoric in response to the “Western” disciplining of belonging to Europe](#) needs to be highlighted. In Croatia, the “East” remained closely associated with the Balkans and—not unimportantly—with its neighbor to the East, Serbia. Despite the [growing importance of Euroscepticism](#) and the strategic use of EU coercion or the European imperialism frame during the marriage referendum campaign, national cultural investment in the Croatian identity as a European identity held strong.

In this context, the referendum initiators (the citizens' initiative *In the Name of the Family*—UIO), together with their mainstream right-wing allies and the Croatian Catholic Church (a key player in both Croatian nation-building and anti-gender mobilizations), preserved a multivalent approach to the European project and LGBT rights during the 2013 campaign, trying to simultaneously espouse both European belonging and anti-LGBT legislation.

Specifically, the referendum campaigners challenged the very idea that their demands made them non-European. While the opponents of the referendum relied primarily on aligning the protection or expansion of LGBT rights with (Western European) “civilizational” values, the referendum campaigners claimed that expansions of LGBT rights (such as marriage or parenting rights) were neither required by European standards nor human rights according to EU legislation. The UIO's demand for a referendum on adding a definition of marriage as a union between a woman and a man to the Croatian Constitution (it was already defined thus in the Family Law) was therefore solely a demand for citizens to exercise their right “[to say what they think and to determine how the society in which they live will look](#)” and “[a big step toward expanding the narrowed space for democracy in Croatia](#).”

The 2013 constitutional referendum was successful—but only because the voter turnout threshold for nationwide referendums of more than 50 percent of registered voters [had previously been abolished to ensure the success of the EU membership referendum](#). Despite an intense six-month campaign that seemed to devour the public space in its efforts to mobilize citizens to vote “for” or “against,” [only 37.9 percent of registered voters turned out, of whom 65.87 percent voted for the constitutional change](#). In other words, the referendum was won on the strength of roughly 25 percent of registered voters—hardly the [“festival of democracy” that had previously been proclaimed by the UIO](#), and perhaps a bit of a hollow legal victory in light of the new Same-Sex Life Partnership Act that was already in the works. Although the UIO unsuccessfully attempted to prevent parliamentary discussion of this Act [by claiming that it went against the majority vote on the referendum](#), the Life Partnership Act came into effect in 2014, giving same-sex partners most of the rights accruing to marriage, with the exception of adoption.

Nonetheless, the marriage referendum was a major symbolic victory for the anti-gender movement in Croatia because—the actual referendum numbers and legal consequences aside—the country that emerged after the referendum campaign *felt* internally divided on gender and sexuality issues. Following the months of constant conflict and polarization in the media, the entry of the [campaign into universities and churches](#), and, if anecdotal evidence is to be trusted, fights in many households across Croatia, it seemed that the [“\(r\)eferendum and referendum results showed an old and severe worldview divide within Croatia](#).” This was not a divide between European, “Western” Croatia and Balkanic, “Eastern” Croatia. Nor was it any longer just a divide between right-wing and left-wing Croatia (previously manifested in the debates on the role of Ustasha and the Partisans in World War Two). Rather, and crucially, this divide between “conservative” and “liberal” Croatia attached itself to the idea of a divide in “worldviews” about sexuality and gender.

This impression then became a key resource for further anti-gender mobilizations that attempted to *make it so*, as the case of mobilization against abortion demonstrates.

Reification of the “Worldview Divide”? The Case of Mobilization against Abortion

Abortion on demand until 10 weeks’ gestation has been legal in Croatia since 1978, when the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia passed the Law on Health Measures for Exercising the Right to Freely Decide on Birth to Children ([NN 18/78](#)), based on the introduction to [the Yugoslav Constitution](#) of a provision enshrining the right of individuals to freely

decide on the birth of children in 1974 (only a year after the landmark *Roe vs. Wade* ruling that established the constitutional right to abortion in the U.S. but has since been [overturned](#)).

The right to decide on the birth of children was quietly [dropped from the 1991 Croatian Constitution](#) (though the 1978 Law remained in effect), and the first decade of postsocialist Croatia was characterized by a strong [re-traditionalization of society](#), considerable growth in the social and institutional [power of the Catholic Church](#), and the ruling regime's firm [promotion of pronatalist family policies](#). Still, even in these circumstances, the legal standing of abortion on demand was not seriously called into question, despite [occasional short-lived attempts](#) to challenge the Yugoslav law or pass a new one.

In the [early years of anti-gender mobilizations](#) in Croatia—encompassing the 2006 sexuality education campaign, the 2012 campaign against embryo freezing, and the 2012-13 second mobilization against sexuality education—the issue of abortion often lurked in the background. Indeed, many of the activists involved in these campaigns were also affiliated with the citizens' initiative Vigilare, founded in 2008 with the explicit mission to “[defend the most basic human right—the right to life from conception and natural death](#),” and/or with the political party HRAST—*Movement for a Successful Croatia*, launched in late 2012 on the platform of “[right to life](#)” and “[legal ban of abortion](#).”

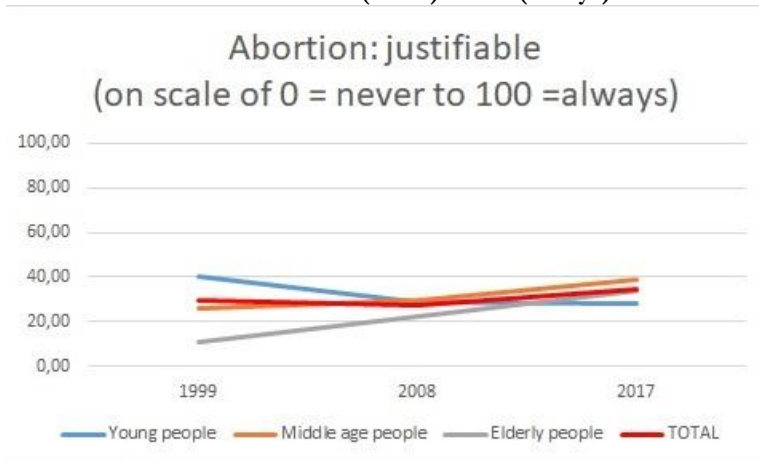
Still, it was only after the marriage referendum campaign accomplished a mobilization (a “conservative revolution,” as the media liked to call it, both [approvingly](#) and [disapprovingly](#)) on a scale that (it is safe to assume) abortion alone would never have achieved that the [tightly networked](#) anti-gender activists involved in these various groups and campaigns saw a clear window of opportunity to seriously challenge the law on abortion. Thus, some two months into the marriage referendum campaign, abortion was finally explicitly announced as a [possible next target](#) by Krešimir Miletić, a prominent anti-gender activist (for Vigilare and the IOU) turned politician (with the HRAST—Movement for a Successful Croatia party), and then, following the referendum victory, reiterated by Vice John Batarelo, the Vigilare founder (and IOU affiliate), as an “[issue that certainly must be opened in Croatia](#).” Indeed, the Croatian public has been witnessing anti-abortion campaigns and activities ever since, including the 2014 launch of the biannual prayer vigils “40 Days For Life” and the 2016 launch of the annual Marches for Life, as well as another [—failed—attempt at a constitutional challenge in 2017](#).

During all these activities, the argument of the “worldview divide” that the marriage referendum supposedly *exposed* or *revealed*—as opposed to, say, *constructed* or, at least, *reified*—has been doing much of the heavy lifting to establish a sense that Croats are indeed deeply divided on gender and sexuality issues such as abortion. For instance, a lengthy [public consultation comment](#) prepared by Croatia’s first anti-gender citizens’ initiative (founded in 2006), *The Voice of Parents For Children*—GROZD, in opposition to the proposed Health (i.e., Sexuality Education) Curriculum in 2018 contains the claim that there is “no consensus in Croatian society” on a woman’s “right to choose,” which is, a few lines later in the text, linked to “gender ideology.”

I do not wish to debate in this text the “reality” of such claims as to a lack of consensus. As [pointed out by Isaacs](#) when talking about the role of both “demand” and “supply” in explaining “culture wars,” the answers to such questions are rarely straightforward, and the Croatian case of abortion testifies to this complexity. For example, one recent study has shown the majority to believe that women should have a right to choose ([2019 public opinion poll by IPSOS](#) with a nationally representative sample) and another has found this to be a majority view across political party affiliations ([2022 HRrejting poll](#)).

At the same time, Croatia has a history of both [obstruction](#) and [stigmatization](#) of women legally demanding abortion, and a different survey question—on whether “abortion can be justified”—produced relatively low agreement in the European Values Study (EVS) in 1999, 2008, and 2017. While it is worth highlighting here that the general trend shows rising support for abortion, it is equally important to note (see Figure 1) that this general trend is brought down by the youngest generations—a finding to which, I believe, it is not irrelevant that Catholic religious instruction has been [given in schools since 1991](#), with the [latest statistics indicating that over 80 percent](#) of students in primary and secondary schools take these classes. Again, therefore, the issue of supply and demand makes the question of consensus difficult to answer in a straightforward way.

Figure 1. Agreement with the statement “Abortion can be justified,” on a scale from 0 (never) to 100 (always)



Source: European Values Study (EVS), data for Croatia from 1999, 2008, and 2017 wave, as presented in the [maps for the Atlas of European Values](#).

This difficulty aside, I argue that statements such as the one about the lack of consensus—which is aligned with a “worldview divide” argument—primarily serve as speech acts. Whether they are true or not is beside the point; what they intend to achieve is to persuade the public that the divide is real, and thus “choosing” a side is an important matter that is less about the issue itself than about where you belong. In the explicit words of the Vigilare founder Baterelo posted on the Vigilare portal in 2022 (in a post that is linked as the [“About Us”](#) section), when it comes to “moral depravity, destruction of the family, abortion, and humiliation of the homeland,” there is a clear division between *us*, “conservatives” who are “faithful Catholics,” and them, “liberals” who are “militant secularists.” By supporting abortion, this framing suggests, individuals put themselves on the “wrong side” of national belonging.

Conclusion

I understand both the “civilizational divide” and the “worldview divide” discussed in this text as derivations of the “cultural wars” concept. They rest on the same type of conflictual binary, one that is primarily concerned with the construction of (non)belonging. The purpose of this (non)belonging construct is to mobilize—to persuade the public that sides must be chosen, and the struggle engaged. Whether the divide or the conflict were there to start with—or whether they are “real”—is beside the point. As one of the main tenets of social constructivism posits, if people perceive the situation as real, it is real in its consequences ([Thomas](#)

[theorem](#)). This is why I understand “cultural wars” to function as a speech act—in saying it is so, the main intent of various actors and activists in their use of the concept is to make it so. We as academics must recognize this and analyze the concept accordingly. We should approach “culture wars” exclusively as a rhetorical device that serves a mobilizational purpose centered around the construction of (non)belonging. Within this framework, we need to understand who uses the concept (or its derivatives); how; and with what consequences—both intended and unintended—in terms of persuading and mobilizing the public. But we should not reify “culture wars” or any of its derivatives by wasting our energies on attempts to measure or operationalize the term or on discussing its analytical value in representing reality.

In presenting the case of mobilization against abortion, I draw on the data collected for the project Sense AGENDa which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101025722.

LEARNING FROM “THE EAST”: TRANSNATIONAL ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION AND THE WEST/EAST DIVIDE

by Katja Kahlina

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In 2017, the World Congress of Families (WCF), one of the leading transnational networks that opposes the concept of gender and LGBTQ+ rights, held its global conference in Budapest, Hungary. On that occasion, the WCF’s long-time president and a co-founder of the U.S.-based National Organization for Marriage, Brian Brown, gave a speech in which he praised Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his cabinet for their pro-natalist family policy and promotion of what he sees as Christian values. Brown’s deep admiration for Orbán’s ideas and politics was readily apparent in the culmination of the speech, when he exclaimed “Let’s learn from one another, let’s learn from Hungary!”

Such open admiration for a country located in Europe’s post-state socialist East may come as a surprise to many. For many years, and especially during and after the Cold War, post-state socialist Eastern Europe was commonly regarded as insufficiently advanced politically, culturally, and economically. In line with this logic, ever since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Eastern European countries have often been regarded as students in need of permanent supervision and tutoring by their Western counterparts ([Kováts 2021](#); [Rumelili 2004](#)). Over the past two decades, the rights of sexual minorities—or their lack thereof—have become an important part of this teacher-student relationship. In this regard, incidents of political homophobia and attacks on Pride Marches in some Eastern European countries have often been interpreted as signs of Eastern European deficiency and insufficient development ([Kahlina 2015](#); [Renkin 2015](#)).

Yet, as I will show in this article, radically different geopolitical meanings pertaining to the Cold War “East”/“West” divide are being fostered and promoted by anti-gender actors.¹ As the abovementioned speech by Brian

¹ Small portions of this article were published in the popular scientific Finnish webjournal *Politiikasta* (see [Kahlina 2020](#)).

Brown suggests, in the context of transnational anti-gender mobilization, former state-socialist countries, including Russia, have come to be regarded as valuable role models for their Western counterparts. In addition to shifting the student-teacher roles, Western anti-gender actors also articulate a strong critique of the contemporary liberal West, especially when it comes to the recent proliferation of LGBTQ+ rights in many countries of the geopolitical West.

I would argue that these new meanings of the old Cold War West/East classification can be seen as key parts of a new civilizationalist imaginary. This imaginary is based on the idea of a common Christian civilization that is seen as being threatened by the contemporary liberal politics of gender and sexuality. As I will show, by combining the heterosexist² concept of family and references to Christianity with overt anti-immigration arguments, this new geopolitical discourse unsettles the asymmetrical symbolic divide between the East and the West inherited from the Cold War period.

World Congress of Families: Collaborations across the East/West Divide

Political mobilizations driven by heterosexist claims of the moral, cultural, and social superiority of nuclear families and essentialized sexual difference have gained momentum in recent years. The intensification of family-focused campaigns has been particularly visible in Europe, where a large number of actions and initiatives targeting the adoption of same-sex marriage laws, legal access to abortion on demand, and the very concept of gender appeared in different countries throughout the 2010s ([Kováts and Pöim 2015](#); [Kuhar and Paternotte 2017](#)). Although forms of action differ from country to country, ranging from grassroots-organized street protests and national referendums on marriage to legal changes and governmental policies, striking discursive resemblances can be identified across different national contexts.

A closer look into the dynamics of transnational cooperation among anti-gender actors reveals strong connections across the East/West divide. Such connections are particularly visible within the abovementioned World Congress of Families, which represents one of the most powerful and enduring networks of actors who oppose more inclusionary policies on sexuality and gender. Established by members of the [influential U.S. Christian Right](#) in the mid-1990s, the WCF organizes global and regional

² I refer to the concept of heterosexism as a way of accounting for the interplay between normative heterosexuality, which stigmatizes non-heterosexual people and relations, and unequal gender relations ([Peterson 1999](#)).

conferences and gatherings with the [aim](#) of “unit[ing] and equip[ping] leaders, organizations, and families to affirm, celebrate, and defend the natural family as the only fundamental and sustainable unit of society.”

While members of the U.S. Christian Right still play a key role in managing the WCF, the last three WCF global conferences have seen the surprising prominence of actors from Europe, particularly its Eastern part, including such countries as Hungary, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Russia. In fact, according to some of the WCF’s leading figures, the partnership between members of the U.S. Christian Right and their Russian counterparts has been one of the key alliances within the WCF network since its inception in the 1990s. In his speech at the WCF meeting in Budapest in 2017, Allan Carlson, one of the founders of the WCF, asserted that the idea of founding such a network came when he was in Moscow in the mid-1990s. According to Carlson, the end of the Cold War opened up space for exploring the similarities and differences between West and East and for building an international “pro-family” movement together (see also [Stoeckl 2020](#)).

According to the “Rights at Risk” [report](#), the WCF’s organizational partners include some of the leading “pro-family” and anti-abortion civil society organizations and initiatives in the U.S. and Europe, such as the U.S.-based Alliance Defending Freedom, Family Watch International, and National Organization for Marriage; CitizenGo from Spain; and Novae Terrae and ProVita from Italy. While one African and two Latin American organizations are listed, the vast majority of key partners come from the US, Europe, and Russia. This suggests, at least for now, a rather strong rootedness of the WCF in the Global North, including Eastern Europe and Russia. The dominance of the Global North has also been reflected in the places where WCF conferences have been held. While some of the organization’s smaller regional conferences have taken place in Latin America and Africa, its bigger global conferences have to date largely been limited to Europe, North America, and Australia. The first WCF global conference was organized in Prague, in post-state socialist Czechia, in 1997, while the most recent three congresses have taken place in Budapest, Hungary in 2017, in Chisinau, Moldova in 2018, and in Verona, Italy in 2019.

In order to understand how alliances within the WCF unsettle the East/West hierarchy inherited from the Cold War period, let me turn to two key geopolitical discourses voiced by WCF participants. The first is an anti-colonial discourse critical of the West, while the second is a discourse of common belonging to an endangered Christian civilization.

Brothers in Arms: Building Alliances through Anti-Colonial Discourse

Anti-colonial discourse is one of the most common rhetorical means through which anti-gender actors have critiqued current Western liberal values (see, for example, [Korolczuk and Graff 2018](#)). Interestingly, Western WCF affiliates (particularly from the U.S. and France) have been particularly invested in voicing the anti-Western discourse, especially in their critiques of transnational institutions such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, and the European Commission. In her speech at the WCF meeting in Budapest, Ludovine de la Rochère, president of the French Protest for All (*La manif pour tous*) initiative, sharply criticized the EU for allowing stronger EU members to impose their sexual politics on less powerful members. During the same congress, Janine Crouse, a board member of the International Organization for the Family (IOF) and a person with lobbying experience at the UN, condemned the UN for “cultural imperialism,” specifically “exporting the worst excesses of the Western world across the globe.”

Similar anti-colonial discourse critical of the liberal West has also been present in some of the key documents produced by the WCF. The [Cape Town Universal Declaration on the Family and Marriage](#), initiated by the WCF and IOF in December 2016 and signed by the members of the WCF network, pledges to “resist the rising cultural imperialism of Western powers”:

Together we join in common cause, East and West, North and South, to stand for a truth that no government can change. Bowing to no earthly power, using every just measure, we shall not falter or flag until the truth about marriage is embraced in our laws and honored in our lands.

As Doris Buss and Didi Herman show in their seminal book [Globalizing Family Values](#), a critique of global interventionism, especially by the UN, has long been one of the key strategies used by the U.S. Christian Right to empower their domestic agenda. With the proliferation of anti-gender networks across the West/East divide, one can argue, the anti-colonial critique of the liberal West can be seen as having acquired another critical role: as a uniting discourse that helps to mitigate the hierarchical divisions of the post-Cold War era. This unity has been further strengthened and manifested through the frequent use of the pronoun “us,” accompanied by the antagonistic “us vs. them” distinction.

However, openness to non-Western contexts within the WCF has its limits. WCF's restricted inclusivity is especially visible in the extreme anti-immigration views shared by many WCF participants. Thus, the seemingly very inclusive anti-colonial discourse of WCF partners and participants, which invites “East and West, North and South” to come together and resist “Western ideological colonization,” stands in tension with the anti-immigration discourses frequently voiced at WCF conferences. As I will show below, anti-immigration discourse—combined with heterosexual ideas of gender and sexuality—constitutes a key element of a new civilizationalist imaginary based on the idea of a shared Christian civilization.

Integrating the Anti-Gender with Anti-Immigration Politics

The depth of the contradiction between the anti-colonial and anti-immigration discourses present at WCF gatherings is best understood if we attend to the [opening speech](#) that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán delivered at the WCF meeting in Budapest. Orbán started his speech with a strong anti-immigration position:

But first allow me to address you as a European politician. In 2015, when we last met, Europe was under siege. [...] Europe is old, rich, and weak. The part of the world which in recent years has sent forth ever more masses of people is, however, young, poor, and strong. The world's population is rapidly growing, while the population of Europe is declining. [...] Europe, our common homeland, is losing out in the population competition between great civilizations. Fewer and fewer marriages are producing fewer and fewer children, and the population is therefore aging and declining.

He went on to more explicitly link anti-immigration politics and restrictive gender and sexuality politics based on utilizing women's reproductive capacities:

In Europe today there are two distinct views on [population decline]. One of these is held by those who want to address Europe's demographic problems through immigration. And there is another view, held by Central Europe—and, within it, Hungary. Our view is that we must solve our demographic problems by relying on our own resources and mobilizing our own reserves. [...] In the struggle for the future of Europe, stopping illegal migration is imperative. This struggle—which is

rationally justified—is only worthwhile if we are able to combine it with a family policy which restores natural reproduction on the continent.

A similar intersection of heterosexist, anti-immigration, and ethno-nationalist politics can be seen in the speeches two years later of Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, MEP Nicholas Bay, and a handful of others at the WCF in Verona. While racializing Islamophobia is only implied in Orbán's speech, it is more openly expressed in Salvini's [speech](#), which contains a direct reference to Islam as a source of threat to women's rights:

The feminists that speak of women's rights and are the first to pretend not to see what is the first, only, and major real danger in 2019 for rights, social achievements, freedom to work, study, speak, study, dress as you like—and it's not the World Family Congress—it's Islamic extremism, a culture where the woman's value is less than zero.

Arguably, WCF participants articulate two key sources of geopolitical threat. One source of threat is located in the Islamic racialized “difference,” which is perceived as a danger to a vaguely defined “our civilization.” In this sense, pronatalist policies aimed at increasing the birth rate and informed by anti-gender and anti-abortion attitudes are seen as a way of countering the unwanted mixing of different cultures through immigration while securing the economic sustainability of the nation.

Along with immigration, there is another source of civilizationalist threat articulated by many within the WCF network. This threat is perceived as coming from contemporary liberal politics, especially its affirmative LGBTQ+ and gender policies. This emancipatory politics of gender and sexuality is seen as undermining the foundations of the claimed Christianity-based Western civilization and its core values. At the same time, the contemporary inclusionary politics of gender and sexuality is seen as closely linked to demographic decline, which is interpreted as a threat to the very existence of imagined European civilization.

Looking at “the East”: Christianity and Shifting East/West Relations

In contrast to the EU, which is often regarded as one of the key promoters of unwanted liberal policies, the countries of Eastern Europe—particularly Hungary and Poland—together with Italy and Russia are seen as role models and potential saviors of Christianity-based European or Western civilization. During the WCF conferences in Budapest and Verona,

Hungary was frequently hailed as a leading "family-friendly" nation, while, as mentioned earlier, WCF president Brian Brown openly expressed his admiration for Hungary as a model. Texts published on the website of the IOF, which runs the WCF, reveal many more examples of "Eastern virtue." More than a few entries in the rubric called International Family News express open admiration for the countries of the former state-socialist bloc (such as Russia, Hungary, and Poland) and their pro-natalist family policies and anti-LGBTQ+ laws.

This new sexual civilizational imaginary thus shifts perceptions of "the East" from "poor, uneducated little brother" to a role model for politics related to gender and sexuality. These alliances and shifting West/East power relations are commonly based on a reference to Christianity as a uniting force and the ultimate moral authority. In other words, within the WCF, Christianity becomes a source of common politics of gender and sexuality and the basis of common cultural belonging. This sense of common cultural belonging through Christianity can be seen as overriding the historical East/West division and providing the basis for a new civilizationalist imaginary that replaces the old Cold War notion of "the West" with the idea of an endangered Christian civilization.

Finally, it is also important to note that the ongoing Russian military attack on Ukraine has created some of the greatest geopolitical turbulence since 1989. As mentioned earlier, prior to the war in Ukraine, Russia and its political leaders were perceived as part and parcel of the shared Christian civilizationalist circle and key partners in the WCF. It is thus unsurprising that the WCF and its media partner International Family News have yet to clearly condemn Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, some Russian conservatives, including the head of Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, have [used](#) a very similar narrative—that of the righteous war against the liberal colonial West—to justify Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, it remains to be seen to what extent and in what ways the war in Ukraine will influence U.S.-Russian cooperation within the WCF and its Christian civilizationalist geopolitical discourse.

CORPORATE, SWEET CORPORATE: LGBTIQ ACTIVISM, BUSINESSES, AND THE SLOVAK CULTURE WARS

by Veronika Valkovičová

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In summer 2021 the Slovak company Dedoles, which sells such basic clothing items as socks and underwear, presented its rainbow collection—a reference to Pride month and the LGBTIQ community. In the face of a significant online backlash, the retailer—whose products come primarily from Turkey and China—declared that for every comment on their Facebook post about the new collection (whether positive or negative), they will donate 1 Euro to the business Fund for the Support of the LGBT+ Community run by the Slovak Pontis Foundation.

This was not the first time a company operating in Slovakia had taken a public stance concerning LGBTIQ persons. The recent involvement of companies and their employees in contentious politics in Slovakia has been so visible that it was even [discussed](#) by economist Jens Schadendorf in the ILGA Europe podcast Frontline, dedicated to private-sector initiatives:

Let's, for instance, take the example of Slovakia. [There is a] shifting global landscape there, so there are challenges, yes, but there are also hot spots of activities already now, which are working in favor of more LGBT equality, in the civil society, but also in the corporate world.

Schadendorf's statement referred to the recent challenges faced by the local LGBTIQ movement, but he is not the only one to have noticed the increasing involvement of businesses. In May 2022, the dominant LGBTIQ social movement organization, Iniciatíva Inakosť, organized an online event entitled *Do Companies Substitute for the State in Educating about the LGBTI+ Topic?*, during which various corporate activities were discussed, including the so-called LGBTIQ business employee resource groups (ERGs). In this text, I would like to reflect upon the role and agenda of ERGs in the broader LGBTIQ social movement in Slovakia, as well as discuss the potential perils of relying on and engaging in [corporate political activism](#).

LGBTIQ Activism and Anti- “Gender Ideology” Rhetoric in Slovakia

When in 2006 the Czech Republic legalized registered partnerships for same-sex couples, a brief optimism overtook the activists of Czechia’s former counterpart, the Slovak Republic. Just two years earlier, as a condition of accession to the European Union, Slovakia had managed to institute anti-discrimination protections for sexual orientation and other characteristics. Still, these changes were not without struggle and significant opposition from nationalist and Christian-democratic political elites—and, moreover, no further successes were achieved. Indeed, as Petra Guasti and Lenka Bustikova [contend](#), even the later inclusion of LGBTIQ persons’ concerns in a governmental advisory committee turned out to be simple window-dressing designed to alleviate international and local non-governmental pressure.

The bogus acceptance of the self-declared social-democratic governing party SMER-SD was soon to be exchanged for the support of others when corruption scandals and oppositional rhetoric toward the party started to dominate the news, as Zuzana Očenášová [notes](#). In 2014, SMER-SD teamed up with KDH (Christian Democratic Movement) to [amend the Slovak constitution](#) to recognize heterosexual marriage alone and further legitimized the mainstreaming of anti-“gender ideology” rhetoric and its actors.

While anti-“gender ideology” rhetoric was growing steadily in prominence even before the constitutional amendment, it was the February 2015 referendum “on family” that enabled the rhetoric to [spill over into mainstream politics](#). While ultimately unsuccessful due to low voter turnout, the mass mobilization occasioned by the referendum campaign under the auspices of the NGO Alliance for Family led to the [advancement of conservative and religious political elites](#).

The rise of “gender ideology” rhetoric in the period prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections allowed the SMER-SD Minister of Culture to block funding for LGBTIQ-focused events in 2019, despite these projects [having received positive reviews from expert evaluators](#). This put many key events, including Bratislava Rainbow Pride, into jeopardy. But the critical situation also sparked new mobilization by oppositional civil society and new funding initiatives, including a joint venture by the civil society sector and the bank Slovenská Sporiteľňa, titled [For Colorful Culture](#), which later transformed into the aforementioned business [Fund for the Support of the LGBT+ Community](#).

In explaining the recent situation in Central and Eastern Europe, which in Slovakia consolidated after the conservative take-over in the parliamentary

elections of 2020, Barša, Hesová, and Slečálek do not shy away from using the term “[culture wars](#)” to describe the shift from policy conflicts and economic struggles to competitions over identities and values. As for recent developments, one week in autumn of 2021 saw far-right parliamentarians put forward [5 legal proposals to curtail LGBTIQ persons’ rights](#), ranging from a ban on medical and legal transition for transgender persons to severe limitations on the freedom to teach about LGBTIQ persons at schools. The politicians in question, former members of ĽSNS (People’s Party—Our Slovakia), claimed to have been inspired by neighboring Hungary.

Although this group of formerly fringe political actors was not able to rally parliament behind their proposals, the governing party coalition follows a similar agenda. In early 2022, the Ministry of Health presented its new regulation simplifying the procedures for medical and legal transition for transgender persons, only for this progress to be rolled back a few days later by members of the ruling OĽANO (Common People—Independent Personalities) party. The latter not only mobilized to [block its implementation](#), but even demanded a return to the harmful 1980s policies of sterilization and castration. Concurrently, country-wide public support for LGBTIQ persons and their political demands is at rock bottom. In [2020, a Globsec Trends report on the CEE region](#) showed that 49% of Slovaks believe that LGBT+ is an immoral and decadent ideology.

Amid these developments, some businesses in Slovakia entered the arena of contentious politics, among them the aforementioned Dedoles and Slovenská Sporiteľňa. While philanthropic endeavors like the 2019 business fund are among the most visible initiatives, we should also be paying more attention to volunteer groups of employees who meet in so-called employee resource groups. These groups have various goals, from lobbying their employers, to raising awareness about LGBTIQ inclusion, to simply socializing and “having fun.” The following section presents the scarce scholarship on these groups, as well as my own research on Slovak LGBTIQ ERGs.

Employee Resource Groups and LGBTIQ Activism

While identity-based organizing of workers is certainly not an invention of the corporate environment, the concept discussed here—employee resource groups (ERGs)—can be traced back to 1970s North America and its [racial-equality and feminist movements](#). As Nicole Raeburn [explains](#) in her seminal work on workplace LGBTIQ activism, the early affinity groups of lesbian and gay employees in the 1980s and 1990s tapped into the institutional experience of collectives such as the black caucuses in order to not only attain social connectivity, but also lobby employers for equal partner benefits. Thanks to a variety of mimetic practices, with wider

support of the movement and growing recognition from the companies and their managers, LGBTIQ ERGs spread across North America and beyond.

Initially organized as [self-help and community-building groups](#) of volunteering employees, today these groups can be much more. While still volunteer in their nature, the groups often benefit tremendously from connections to management and finding the right managerial “sponsor.”

The available scholarship on ERGs focuses primarily on the experience of the Global North, specifically the diverse agendas of these groups. Rod P. Githens, for example, [argues](#) that ERGs have been known to foster change at three levels: the level of an individual (e.g., by personal development), the level of an organization (e.g., via policy change and change in organizational culture), and a broader societal level (e.g., by challenging heteronormativity). Further research into these groups distinguishes between the objectives of [visibility and community](#)—that is, between gaining recognition for previously stigmatized LGBTIQ identities and raising awareness of equality. Some researchers also argue that ERGs tend to have the objective of providing employees with a [“voice” at the company table](#).

My research among ERGs indicates that these objectives are likewise present among groups based in Bratislava. LGBTIQ advocacy has historically been known for its use of two mobilizing narratives: [sameness and difference](#). Whereas the former promotes the minority group as respectable workers with families “just like everyone else,” the latter recognizes the group as different from the majority and challenges social norms of sexuality and gender identity. As these groups employ difference by, for example, educating employees about trans and non-binary identities, they are also good at more subtle movement-building, such as spreading LGBTIQ symbolism by celebrating international remembrance days like the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia.

While the [mere existence](#) of an ERG is sometimes celebrated as a sign of success in challenging organizational heteronormativity (as these groups’ unspoken motto is that not everyone in the company is straight or cisgender), hand in hand with visibility comes socializing and networking, which have added value. When talking to members of ERGs, I found that personal professional growth was frequently mentioned as a benefit of membership. The embeddedness of LGBTIQ employee resource groups within the corporate world, its values and structures set these groups apart from other collective actions. Being an LGBTIQ person or embracing broader social justice values as an ally are the push factors that bring

individuals to activism, but the promise of professional growth is definitely the pull factor for ERGs.

Lastly, the corporate environment provides some certainties and protections. When discussing past opposition to these groups within companies, I was struck by the general lack of open backlash against or hostility toward members within the company. As one member put it:

I would not say there is opposition, because even before a group is created, there are rules to be followed. You have to show your rules, vision, what it is that you want to do. [...] And people who approve the creation of such a group [...], they will only approve such a group if the group supports what is asserted by [the company]. Which means our values. So, this first condition theoretically excludes the possibility that the groups would oppose each other or have a conflict.

It is thus safe to say that while ERG members bear some costs of LGBTIQ activism (such as being outed as an LGBTIQ person in the workplace), the costs of activism are much lower than outside the companies, as they are reduced by the employer. However, this does not mean that there is no toll elsewhere, as I will discuss in the next section.

Workplace Activism and the Flipside of the Call for Authenticity

When studying LGBTIQ employee resource groups in corporate America, Nicole Raeburn [recognized](#) two logics that were harnessed by activist employees to push for change: the logic of ethics, which contained social-justice values such as LGBTIQ equality, and the logic of profits. While the author observed their interchangeable usage, she extensively discussed the nature of the latter, which can be summarized as: LGBTIQ equality is good for business. While the call for equal dental benefits does not resonate in Slovakia, a country with a universal healthcare system, the logic of profits tends to be packaged in a call for authenticity, along the lines of the argument of “[the cost of the closet](#).” In this vein, a brochure on LGBTIQ inclusion in the workplace produced by [Pontis Foundation](#) explains to employers:

An approach that does not tolerate discrimination and respects individuality brings clear economic benefits to the company. Companies are able to attract new talent, and most importantly, because people are allowed to be themselves, the company can retain the talent.

As a call for equality and inclusion, the argument for authenticity can be harnessed for business purposes, as its implicit message is: LGBTIQ employees welcome. And who would not want to feel safe? In a country where only [31% of Slovaks agreed](#) that lesbian, gay or bisexual persons should have the same rights as heterosexual people (the lowest share in the EU), the call for safe community resonates with many. At an online public event of one of the ERGs I studied in summer 2021, as well as during my interviews, I heard members speak of their company community: “I found many friends via our group” or “We do spend a lot of time at work, so here we are like a family.” It is not project management meetings and consultations with management that create such community, but rather the “fun” activities and the socializing, which bring added value both to members and to the company.

According to [Peter Fleming](#), recent endeavors to pursue authenticity by promoting “personal” aspects of the self—those associated with the realm of non-work—are rooted in the political economy of corporations. The author argues that as managers look for ways to “reconcile the employee to the unpleasant reality of the work,” they become more interested in how the employees feel at work and thus in bringing more meaning to workers’ shifts by appealing to their private identities. This came up in my discussions with ERG members as we spoke about motivations for engaging in the group’s activities: a few members openly referred to the group as an escape from 8 hours of mundane work and Excel spreadsheets. If one is paid to be at work, one might as well try to spend the time pleasantly, or to become more than a common worker. Yet this may further jeopardize the boundary between work and non-work, which suffered tremendously during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the creation of a safe and welcoming space at work—a community of like-minded people, friends, even family—may be perceived positively, it prompts Peter Fleming and André Spicer to [ask](#): can one ever then “leave work”?

We may also be forgetting that the aforementioned absence of opposition or open hostility significantly reduces the costs or risks of activism in company LGBTIQ ERGs. While ERG members ascribe this to company policies of zero tolerance of discrimination and harassment, they are not unduly idealistic: many recognize that employees harboring heterosexist attitudes exist but simply keep these attitudes to themselves. Considering that company policy limits their (hostile) self-expression, the workplace cannot entirely be understood as a safe space. This is even more evident in cases where ERGs benefit from good relationships with the management and their management sponsor, as a change at the top can make a huge difference to the available resources and recognition. In sum, while

employees are exhorted to be authentically themselves, the authenticity of a “tolerant” workplace culture remains fleeting.

Conclusions

The material and immaterial resource pools of Slovak LGBTIQ activists have been draining over the past decade, especially as weak ties to the state have disappeared. These organizations depend on financial assistance not only for their advocacy work, but also for the provision of services, such as legal and psychological counseling centers, which accordingly [struggle](#) to sustain themselves. In a country with a very limited culture of private donations, turning to cooperative businesses is a blessing, albeit not one that should be accepted uncritically.

While the [United Nations calls for companies](#) to “act in the public sphere” on behalf of LGBTIQ persons, the logic of profit remains the primary driving force behind corporate activity. This logic also tends to steer corporate advocacy toward those initiatives which are the closest to business activity, such as philanthropy and fundraisers via product sales. Some Slovakia-based companies that engage in such fundraisers claim not to benefit greatly therefrom; such activities therefore help them to cultivate their image as “an inclusive employer.” Their employees’ volunteer efforts to create spaces in which they can be their authentic LGBTIQ selves are not supported by companies entirely out of an altruistic desire to form safer communities, but also because they recognize such spaces as supporting company efforts to “attract talent.”

Such recruitment efforts may be especially appealing to LGBTIQ workers in countries like Slovakia, where many do not even experience their family homes as safe spaces. But the idea that one can escape the repressive state and the insecure family into the realm of work is unsettling if we recognize that individuals only have value to an employer if they are productive in desired ways. As the personal spills into the workplace, the employer appropriates even more time, mental space, and emotional labor from the employee. At the end of the day, an ERG supported and overseen by management is certainly more beneficial to the company than a union.

Being active in contentious politics while simultaneously being at work seems a reasonable choice compared to the precarious and costly experience of engaging in Slovak civil society. What is more, the activities of ERGs carry great value not only for companies, but also for those involved in them, be it LGBTIQ individuals or allies. However, when trying to understand the involvement of businesses within culture wars, as Alexandra Chasin [reminds us](#), we must not forget about the risk of conflating strategic political mobilizations with the individual’s freedom of

market choices: freedom to consume rainbow products or to work for an LGBTIQ-friendly employer. Even if financial resources usually help, it takes more to challenge heterosexist states and their oppressive politics.

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

by Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer

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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 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-

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/>.

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.

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 heterogeneous 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.

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 schools [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 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.

HOW THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT CONTRIBUTED TO MARRIAGE EQUALITY IN SLOVENIA

by Roman Kuhar

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In summer 2022, Slovenia became the first post-socialist country to introduce marriage equality, including the possibility of adopting children. This might have seemed sudden from afar, but it took 33 years of hard work to bring about such a change. The first initiative to regulate this area, which went unimplemented, was launched in 1989, shortly before the break-up of Yugoslavia, and attempts to pass relevant legislation gained momentum again at the end of the 1990s. The tale is full of legal twists and turns: indirectly, the change in the law was a consequence of eight draft bills, four adopted acts that only partially regulated the area, two referendums, one Supreme Court decision, one District Court decision, and six Constitutional Court decisions (the most recent two of which ruled that same-sex couples must enjoy the same rights and obligations as heterosexual couples, and that same-sex couples must have the same right to apply for adoption of children as heterosexual couples).

However, the legal aspects of this tale, while important, are not sufficient to allow us to understand its complexity. Instead, it is necessary to look at the broader social context, including the changing attitudes of Slovenian society toward homosexuality and the emergence of new social actors, known today as the anti-gender movement, that have significantly shaped and influenced these changes. In recent years, we have been confronted with something like an explosion of research on the anti-gender movement in national and transnational contexts, all of which points to the movement's negative consequences for sexual minorities and its disintegration of sexual citizenship. While there is no denying these findings, I will attempt to show how the anti-gender movement in Slovenia—despite the many successes and legal victories it has achieved, mainly through the strategic use of referendums—has contributed to positive shifts in societal attitudes and, ultimately, to equal rights, which were the goal of the LGBT movement and other progressive movements in Slovenia from the very beginning.

The Debate on Same-Sex Partnership

I have written about the history of the adoption of legislation on same-sex partnerships in Slovenia on several occasions ([source 1](#), [source 2](#), [source 3](#)). To make this history easier to understand, let me divide it into four phases: (1) the professed support of the left; (2) the takeover of the issue by the right; (3) the period of referendums and the anti-gender movement; and (4) strategic litigation.

The Professed Support of the Left

The first period, spanning the 1990s and leading up to 2005, was characterized by the gradual, cautious, and mainly superficial support of left-wing political parties for the efforts of LGBT organizations to regulate same-sex partnerships. At the same time, this period was also marked by relatively unstructured and fragmented opposition from right-wing, conservative parties. The Catholic Church occasionally joined the debate, but their arguments were mostly framed with biblical discourse, which [had little resonance](#) in Slovenia's increasingly secular society.

The first period sought to find an approximation to marriage. The debate on marriage equality was virtually non-existent, but there was agreement in principle and in public statements that this area should be regulated, at least in certain respects. Although some representatives of left-wing political parties actively campaigned for the adoption of marriage-equality legislation, the legislative process was blocked time and again, not least because left-wing political parties, which were the sponsors of such legislation, did not have enough support within their own ranks to pass it.

Specifically, some individuals in left-wing parties, due to their moral and ethical values, refused to support the changes proposed by their own parties. Such opposition within left-wing political parties subsequently disappeared, indicating a growing social consensus on how these issues should be regulated. Moreover, right-wing parties gradually came to accept the need for some kind of legal regulation of same-sex partnerships, although they insisted on a clear symbolic and legal distinction between this and heterosexual marriage. Furthermore, adoption represented a fundamental "no-go" zone. Slovenian society continues to have the biggest problem with this issue, just as other European societies do ([Eurobarometer 2006](#), [Eurobarometer 2019](#)).

The Right Takes over the Issue

The second, shortest phase began with the victory of right-wing political parties in the snap election of 2004. Janez Janša, president of the right-wing [Slovenian Democratic Party](#) (SDS), became Prime Minister. His party had strongly opposed equal rights for homosexual and heterosexual couples. As this was already a major political issue at the time, and in the years to follow it would become a standard question from journalists in pre-election debates, the Janša government adopted the issue as “its own” and dealt with it within just a few months. In 2005, Slovenia became the first country in the world where legislation on same-sex partnerships was adopted at the national level by a right-wing political grouping. While the act was inadequate, discriminatory in some respects, and adopted without dialogue with the LGBT community, it struck a blow to left-wing political parties, which had failed to muster enough political will to regulate same-sex partnerships following their lengthy debates on the issue. The outcome of the decision made by the Janša government was threefold.

First, when Slovenia became a member of the European Union, the Janša government strategically portrayed the adoption of this legislation as a sign of their tolerant, progressive, and inclusive policy. Second, domestically, it temporarily silenced the LGBT community, as the latter had finally been granted some rights. Third, the public was given the impression that the issue had been satisfactorily dealt with, while the Janša government satisfied its electoral base by establishing legal and symbolic distinctions between same-sex partnerships and heterosexual marriage. In effect, the law legalized the second-class status of homosexual citizens: it granted them limited rights (inheritance, hospital visits), while also establishing clear symbolic distinctions between marriage for heterosexual couples (who could marry on Saturdays in a solemn event) and the registration of same-sex unions (which was reduced to an administrative procedure at the municipality to be carried out during office hours on weekdays).

The New Conservative Opposition

The third phase was the most wide-ranging, and it represented a significant change in the strategies of those groups opposed to the adoption of the legislation. In 2009, when the Ministry of Labor, Family, and Social Affairs proposed the new Family Code (which had not been comprehensively amended in more than 40 years since it was drafted in the former Yugoslavia), it included equal provision for same-sex couples. The tabling of the bill in Parliament in September 2009 was accompanied by the entry onto the scene of a new actor—the Movement for Families and Children—that would become the leading anti-gender actor in Slovenia in the years

that followed. The movement initially strived to present itself as a group of concerned parents, but it soon became obvious that it was run by the Catholic Church as part of their [plan of re-evangelization](#). Accordingly, the movement functioned as a satellite of the Church. Another important development was the changed discourse of Church representatives in the debate on the new Family Code. Instead of biblical references, they began to cite the findings of sociological and psychological research, but they presented them in a distorted form. This laid the foundations for what we now call the anti-gender movement in Slovenia. Although in 2009 these actors were not yet referring to gender theory (in Slovenia the term “gender theory” is used rather than “gender ideology”), the argumentation frameworks had already been set up at that time; subsequently, their arguments were simply attached to the empty signifier of gender theory. These discourses then became part of the activities of right-wing political parties, especially Janša’s SDS, which had been radicalized and was moving rapidly toward populist practices.

The promoters of the new Family Code and the LGBT organizations that participated in the drafting of the legislation were thus confronted with an organized opposition that used new discourses and new ways of action, centering its arguments around the concept of human rights and a moral concern for “our children,” “our families,” and “our nation.” The Slovenian anti-gender movement features—mostly in a copy-paste manner—virtually all [the strategies used by anti-gender movements](#) around the world, including two legislative referendums in 2012 and 2015. In 2012, a law that would have put same-sex couples on an equal footing with heterosexual couples—the only differences being the name of the institution (marriage vs. civil partnership), a ban on adoption for same-sex couples, and a ban on assisted insemination for same-sex couples—was defeated in a referendum. In 2015, a law that had provided for full equality of same-sex and heterosexual couples was likewise repealed in a referendum forced by the anti-gender movement.

Both legislative acts were passed under left-wing governments at a time when left-wing political forces were strongly in favor of the proposed solutions, but time could not be turned back: the indecisiveness of the left at the beginning of the new millennium would allow the right and the neo-conservative opposition to determine the pace and topics of the debate for the next 20 years. Marriage equality advocates were often put on the defensive. However, it was this fact that ultimately led to a rapid reversal of the situation: in parliamentary proceedings the day after the second referendum in 2015, the left-wing coalition tabled a “compromise” version of the bill that was virtually identical to the one that had been repealed in the 2012 referendum. This time, the left—partly as a direct response to the

hostile actions of the anti-gender movement and its political allies—passed the law. The anti-gender movement ran out of steam after the second referendum: while they prevented full equality of rights, their actions contributed to mobilizing an angry left, which kept losing legal battles but ultimately became determined to resolve the issue. In 2016, a law was passed that guaranteed equal rights to same-sex and heterosexual couples, except for the name of the institution, the possibility of joint adoption, and assisted insemination.

Strategic Litigation

The last phase in this long tale is strategic litigation. Two facts are interesting here: the last step was not taken by LGBT organizations, which had lost the left-wing political parties as an interlocutor after the adoption of the 2016 act (as the issue seemed to have been adequately regulated), but by individuals frustrated by the years-long ravages of the anti-gender movement in Slovenia. A constitutional challenge was lodged by two gay couples: one because they wanted to get married, the other because they wanted to adopt a child. The LGBT movement had avoided taking this step, knowing that it would put the entire struggle at risk. After all, it was by no means certain that the Constitutional Court would rule as it did—and had it ruled otherwise, it would have been an overwhelming victory for the anti-gender movement.

Enter the Anti-Gender Movement

Just like the phases of adopting legislation on same-sex partnerships and families, the anti-gender movement in Slovenia has also been changing.

In the early period—when the idea of “gender theory” as an empty signifier was applied in Slovenia mainly to denote an attack on traditional families and “our children”—the movement tried to create an image for itself as a civil society organization that represented the voice of reason. Its starting point was the observation that things had simply gone too far and that their intervention was therefore essential. Members of the movement positioned themselves as concerned and silenced citizens and/or parents fighting “corrupt elites.” The basic matrix of their populist action was absolutely clear.

The movement initially concealed its close ties to the Catholic Church. Instead, it portrayed itself as a group of concerned citizens, both religious and secular. However, this image began to disintegrate as its links to the Church became clearer. Not only was their official website hosted on the server of the Slovenian Catholic Church, but the organization within which the movement operated had been founded in 2009 by a theologian who

would become the Secretary General of the Slovenian Bishops' Conference. Thereafter, members of the movement began to discursively emphasize that their Catholic identity was under threat, associating this with the issue of human rights. Although they still tried to address broad masses of people regardless of religious affiliation, self-referential statements such as "We Catholics believe ..." began to appear in their public statements and press releases. But this was not their only line of communication with the public. They specifically tried to address protective modern parents by creating episodes of moral panic and encouraging them to protect their children, who were said to be subjected to brainwashing by activist groups in schools.

They exploited the broken relationship between the authority of educators/schools and some parents, who increasingly try imposing their particular values upon school curricula—all in the name of protecting children. While some of the movement's activities provoked discomfort related to homosexuality, others fomented existing mistrust of social institutions, such as schools, which were alleged to be in the hands of corrupt elites. In this case, it was not homophobia that was being exploited, but the belief that things were crossing a line: homosexuality could be tolerated, their message went, but "we won't be giving up our children." This concern for children became even more pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic: anti-vaccination movements partly overlapped with anti-gender movements (similar overlaps have been identified in Sweden by [Martinsson and Ericson](#)).

Children Are at Stake, but So Are Grandparents!

A distinctive feature of the Slovenian anti-gender strategy is its explicit reference to grandparents as a group at risk, which is a deliberate strategic move in an aging society such as Slovenia's. It has activated strong emotional responses, as grandparents relate to the issue of same-sex partnerships mainly through the question of adoption. The anti-gender movement has consistently claimed that if same-sex adoption is legalized, it is grandparents who will suffer the greatest harm: they will not be able to adopt their grandchildren in the event of the death of the children's parents; instead, the children will be forced into the hands of homosexuals.

The explosive nature of this claim was clearly evident during a national radio call-in program: although a spokesperson for the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities explained that the claims of the anti-gender movement were not true and clarified how adoptions were processed in Slovenia, the listeners nevertheless, one after the other, yelled emotionally into the phone that they were not giving up their children and

asked what paperwork they had to fill out to prevent their children from being “taken by faggots” in the event of their death.

The claim that grandparents cannot adopt their grandchildren is technically correct, but the inference is completely misleading. Under Slovenian law, an adoptive parent receives the status of “biological relative” and all corresponding rights. Therefore, the law does not allow adoption within the close family, because it would break down family relations (for example, the grandmother would become the child’s mother, the child’s uncles and aunts would become their siblings, etc.). That said, whenever a child loses their parents, the best interests of the child are always considered first in the context of the child’s family network. The child can be placed with grandparents or other relatives, who become the child’s foster parents (rather than adoptive parents) with the same rights.

However, this second part has been completely obfuscated in the movement’s populist manipulation, which is in line with their discursive formula: facts are mixed with fabricated information, which is then bundled into simple claims that the movement repeats over and over again until they become “mobilizing truths.” The mantra of grandparents as victims of same-sex adoption is the movement’s most persistent claim, alongside the mantra that a child needs a father and a mother, and that even a good father cannot replace the mother (and vice versa). These soundbites are spread by the actors of this movement through the megaphone of social networks, their own media, and the reproduction of their discourse in the mainstream media. The image of the child and the homosexual triggers various phantasmatic scenarios of disgust, rejection, and anxiety, and this was the main mobilizing force during both referendums.

Transformations of the Anti-Gender Movement

The anti-gender movement in Slovenia has undergone a series of transformations. Initially called the Civil Initiative for Family and Children’s Rights, the organization later changed its name to the more punchy and moral-panic-stoking “It’s All about Children.” Having gained considerable political capital by winning both referendums, in 2017 the movement founded the Voice for Children and Families party, of which Aleš Primc, the movement’s most prominent figure, became president. [The party’s program](#), which it summarized as “traditional values that keep the nation alive,” was a mix of social policies (youth employment, fair pay, care for the elderly), themes related to the anti-gender movement (demographic winter, the heterosexual family, the unacceptability of abortion), and nationally specific themes, such as the functioning of the country’s legal system, which

they claimed was still a prisoner of communist political elites. They also advocated the reintroduction of military service for young men.

The party aspired to stand in an election for the first time in 2018. However, having drawn up electoral lists and formally entered the electoral process, they withdrew in all constituencies shortly before the general election. They made a mistake in two constituencies by including too few women on their lists (no gender can be represented on the list by less than 35 percent of the candidates), which led the Electoral Commission to reject their application. Although they could have run in the remaining constituencies, they decided to stand down and the party's president called on voters to vote for the SDS, Janez Janša's increasingly radical right-wing party, with which Voice for Children and Families had collaborated closely during the referendums. Some political commentators interpreted the party's withdrawal from the election as a [premeditated scenario](#) that would strengthen the power of the largest right-wing party (the SDS) by harnessing the political capital of the anti-gender movement.

At that time, the anti-gender movement in Slovenia was already closely intertwined with established political parties. "Gender theory" became a mainstream political signifier for an important part of the ideological struggles for the cultural hegemony of the right. It became a recognizable signifier to trigger episodes of moral panic and to mobilize mostly conservative segments of society and those who would later organize themselves around anti-vaccination and similar ideas.

The radicalization of the anti-gender movement in Slovenia—especially during and after the second referendum—led to the unmasking of this movement as a mere servant not only of the Catholic Church, but also of the radical right and its key actor, Janša, who acts as a central point of conflict in Slovenian politics. Janša's ambitions are to create a political situation similar to that in Viktor Orbán's Hungary. Orbán is his great ally and friend, who, among other things, ensured that Hungarian investors invested money in Janša's party-political media. The [Orbánisation of Slovenia](#) had been already under way for several years when it intensified during the last Janša government (2020–2022), which used the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext for increasingly authoritarian measures and laws. Although Janša has a solid core of voters, however, this base is too small for an Orbán-style takeover of the country. This was evident in the last general election, when the Slovenian electorate, which has traditionally leaned center-left, voted overwhelmingly in favor of the newly formed center-left party [Gibanje Svoboda](#) (The Freedom Movement), which had established itself as the counterbalance to "Janšism," the Slovenian version of Orbán's politics.

After 2018, the anti-gender Voice for Children and Families party was not involved in an election until 2022, when the [party's leader ran for Mayor of Ljubljana](#), the capital of Slovenia. He came third, receiving 6.95 percent of the vote.

With a Little Help from the Anti-Gender Movement...

So how has the anti-gender movement in Slovenia contributed to marriage equality? During the first period of attempts to regulate same-sex partnerships, the public generally stayed out of the debate. The key gatekeepers preventing the adoption of the legislation were politicians (including on the political left) and part of the legal profession, due to their insistence on heteronormative concepts of marriage. However, change in this area occurred relatively quickly: since the beginning of the new millennium, the legal, as well as the sociological and psychological, professions have—with few exceptions—been advocating marriage equality, including adoption. Left-wing political parties have also moved beyond internal divisions and, at least in principle, sought to bring about this change. The pressure of so-called European values—understood as progressive policies of equality to be adopted by post-socialist countries that have been lagging behind the seemingly unquestionable Western European values system—has certainly contributed to this.

In 2009, the anti-gender movement intervened in this situation by mobilizing the public against the changes. The movement, which initially tied itself to the established network of the Catholic Church, did not completely deny the necessity of legal regulation of same-sex partnerships. Instead, they presented themselves as “middle-of-the-road,” a voice of the reasonable majority that does not deny rights to the minority but insists on the legal and symbolic superiority of a family composed of a heterosexual couple with children on the grounds that this is allegedly in the best interests of the child, the state, and the nation. This argument, which is fundamentally based on biological reproduction, covers their entire ideological field—from the ancient Platonist argument of natural sexuality to the denial of modern technology-assisted reproductive processes, women’s reproductive rights, and abortion. While their cloak of apparent tolerance was quickly discredited, the movement nevertheless established itself as an important actor in Slovenian society that is entitled to participate in drafting of family and related policies in the country. Today, its representatives are members of expert committees in ministries and are invited as stakeholders to discuss these issues.

The appearance of the anti-gender movement on the scene of political struggles related to sexual citizenship, in addition to democratic backsliding more generally, triggered important political opportunities for the LGBT movement and other progressive movements. Just as hate speech against the LGBT community and feminist groups has often led to a closing of ranks on the side of those who oppose reproductive rights and LGBT rights, this closing of ranks has resulted in a reaction on the other side. In other words, the anti-gender movement has created new opportunities for the LGBT community, and the LGBT community has made good use of them. Both referendums were a defeat in legal terms but a victory for the LGBT community in Slovenia in social terms. Ever since 1984, when the first gay organization in Slovenia, Magnus, was founded, the movement has sought public attention, but its activities have often been circumscribed.

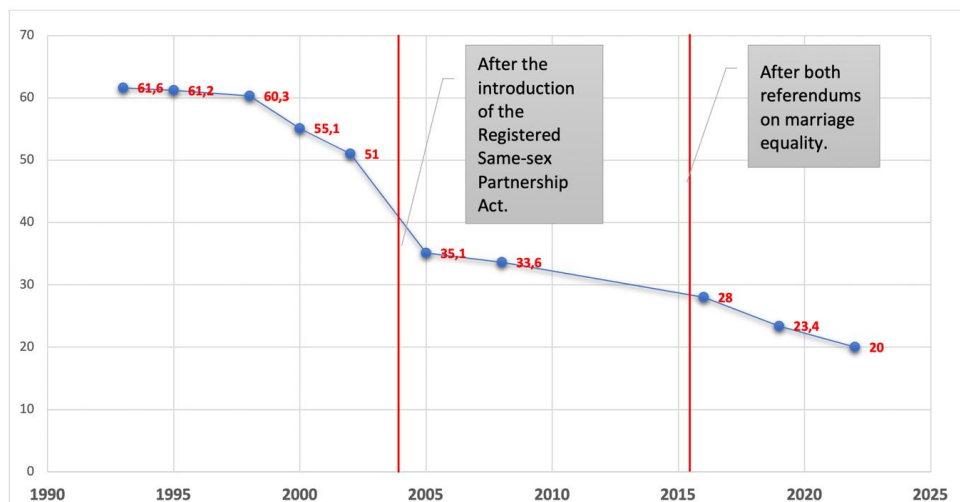
However, with the two referendum campaigns and the activities of the increasingly radical anti-gender movement, the public space has been opened up, giving a voice to many in the LGBT community and among its supporters who previously had none. Personal stories of parents with homosexual children, same-sex couples raising children, and of course LGBT activists (who were present before) could all finally be heard. At the level of representation, this has meant significant changes to the visibility of the LGBT community and its political demands. Simultaneously, and for the first time, this has led to the creation of broader networks of alliances, not only between LGBT organizations, but also with other NGOs that recognize the importance of a common struggle for human rights. The more repetitive the anti-gender movement's mantras about adoption and the "real family" became, the more space was created for a more expert debate on these issues. While academia did not participate in the loud populist rhetoric, the issue of sexual citizenship did gain a prominent place within the scientific community thanks to the activities of the anti-gender movement.

Change of Hearts and Minds

While there was a time when it seemed that the anti-gender movement was winning—populism garnered easily attainable votes from anxious individuals and the double victory in the referendums was a significant confidence boost for the movement—a referendum is not an opinion poll. During and after the referendum campaigns, important shifts in public attitudes occurred, which was another consequence of (and a response to) the anti-gender movement. At the time of the two referendums, as shown in the graph below, social distance from homosexuals in Slovenia began to decline significantly. Whereas in the 1990s more than half of Slovenian citizens did not want to have a homosexual as a neighbor, this figure now

stands at 20 percent. The turning points in the reduction of social distance occurred in the period after the first act on registered partnerships was adopted and in the period after the debates on the two referendums (see [Takács, Szalma & Bartus \(2016\)](#) for similar trends in other European countries).

Figure 1. Social distance from homosexuals in Slovenia (“I don’t want a homosexual to be my neighbor”)



Sources: Slovenian public opinion poll (1992–2022), FDV-CJMMK

There have also been significant shifts in support for same-sex marriage and adoption. At the time of the referendums, same-sex marriage was supported by around 42 percent of respondents ([Ninamedia](#)); that figure is now 60 percent. Meanwhile, support for adoption has risen from 31 percent in 2006 ([Eurobarometer](#)) to 48 percent, according to this year’s [Slovenian Public Opinion poll](#).

Despite the fact that the anti-gender movement did everything it could to mobilize people against LGBT rights and was successful in the short term (laws that had been passed were rejected in subsequent legislative referendums), the long-term consequences have been positive: increased public support as a result of the anti-gender movement’s struggle has provided the LGBT community with a wide media and political space to discuss these issues. Thus, the anti-gender movement in Slovenia, while successfully gaining support for itself, has also created opportunities for the LGBT community, which the latter seems to have seized. Same-sex

partnerships (and, to a lesser extent, same-sex families) have become mainstream.

The Constitutional Court's Decisions

While the Constitutional Court's [two decisions this summer](#) were a response to a petition by two same-sex couples, the reasoning of the decisions implicitly addresses the anti-gender movement and the way it operates. The Constitutional Court's decision was to be implemented immediately, rather than after a change to the law, which the legislator was ordered to make within six months of the decision. There are Constitutional Court decisions in Slovenia that have not been implemented and there was a possibility that the anti-gender movement, in close cooperation with right-wing parties, would try to prevent the existing legislation from being amended in line with the Constitutional Court's decision.

The Court thus decided to take a different approach: it implemented its decision by stipulating that same-sex couples can, on the basis of the Constitutional Court's decision alone, marry and apply for adoption immediately, even before the legislation is amended accordingly. The act has since been amended, but the anti-gender movement has started collecting signatures for another referendum. Legally, this referendum is not permissible, as decisions of the Constitutional Court cannot be challenged in referendums. Nevertheless, the anti-gender movement has reactivated itself to mobilize its support, amplify its policies of fear, and reinforce the political frustrations of a certain segment of the society, which they will seek to exploit at the next available opportunity.

The Constitutional Court, in the elaboration of its decisions, as well as in the separate supporting opinions of some judges, clearly refers to the anti-gender movement as an unacceptable way of suppressing the human rights of a minority. Among other things, the Court writes that "discrimination cannot be justified by the traditional meaning of marriage as a union of husband and wife, nor can it be justified by the special protection of the family" and that the implementation of human rights cannot be conditional on the support of the majority of the population ([Constitutional Court Press Release](#)).

The President of the Constitutional Court, Dr. Matej Accetto, adds:

Our happiness cannot be founded on others' misfortune, our security on others' danger, our justice on others' injustice. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of us all to relegate unjustified discrimination against homosexual individuals to the past of injustices that are now outdated and have been overcome ([Accetto's affirmative dissenting opinion](#), 2022).

In her separate supporting opinion, Judge Dr. Katja Šugman Stubbs is even more explicit:

Some proponents of so-called traditional marriage and family believe that our decision will take something away from those who live in such unions and families, or that it will change their status. This is really hard to understand. They can marry and live in the way that suits them, without anyone telling them what is right and wrong in their family or sex life. If they believe it is only natural and right to marry a partner of the opposite sex, they can do so. If they believe that psychologically healthy children can only be raised in traditional families, then they should do so. Allowing same-sex couples to do the same makes them no less husbands and wives and no less mothers and fathers to their children. Let me repeat it: there is no convincing scientific evidence suggesting that children in same-sex families are worse off. Hence, I think that the battle for traditional families lies more in the domain of the personal beliefs and prejudices of the people who take their beliefs as facts, uncritically believe that only what they believe is right, and patronizingly think that they also know what is right for others. The mere fact that they live in a way that is more common does not give them the right to impose their beliefs on others. Nor can the law take into account that they may feel threatened, outraged or aggrieved just because there may be different marriages and different families from their own. They will simply have to face these feelings. [...] Let me conclude by paraphrasing the words of one of the Constitutional Court judges, which express best how I, as a human being, feel about these issues: who am I to deny to others the rights that I myself

can enjoy? ([Šugman Stubbs' affirmative dissenting opinion](#), 2022).

Conclusion

The claim that the anti-gender movement has contributed to equal rights may seem a little far-fetched. However, both opinion polls and the Constitutional Court's decisions show that one of the reasons that Slovenia became the first country in post-socialist Europe to adopt marriage-equality legislation is the radical activities of the anti-gender movement. Without this movement, legislation would have been adopted much earlier, but in all likelihood in a truncated form, as no bill that had been proposed up to 2015 fully addressed the issue of same-sex partnerships and adoption. After the adoption of the "compromise act" in 2016, it would have been difficult for the LGBT movement to revive interest in the issues among political parties, as the prevailing view would have been that they were already well regulated. After all, this perception has emerged in recent years, whereupon the issue disappeared from the agenda of the LGBT movement in Slovenia—partly because the anti-gender movement launched a new offensive, this time against the transgender community. The frustration of the same-sex couples who eventually filed the constitutional complaint was a direct response to the anti-gender movement. However, as one of the couples who lodged the constitutional challenge pointed out, it is not appropriate to interpret the Constitutional Court's decisions as a "victory;" rather, they should be seen as a "success:"

"A victory would go to the detriment of the other," they explained, "but [success is for the benefit of everyone](#), of society as a whole. So let's remain alert to the various injustices in society, especially those that happen to those who are different from us. And let's not allow anyone to ever pit us against each other on the pretext that more rights for others means fewer rights for us."

The anti-gender movement in Slovenia has thoroughly shaken up the issues and policies related to sexual citizenship. It has established itself as a stakeholder and, drawing on the know-how and the mobilization of the conservative part of the Slovenian public, achieved visible victories by employing the recognizable strategies of anti-gender movements across Europe, including collecting signatures to trigger referendums. However, in the long run, its activities have also led to the reactivation of the progressive part of civil society in Slovenia. It has forced the LGBT community to think strategically about its actions and to build coalitions with other civil society actors.

The greatest impact of the anti-gender movement seems to have been on ordinary people who had not previously been politically active. For a long time, the LGBT community struggled to become more visible and to overcome media representations that primarily portrayed the community through the images of a few activists, but it was not until the referendum campaigns that more individuals with their own stories entered the public sphere. Furthermore, the LGBT community has been supported by prominent individuals from all walks of life, which has also had a positive impact on the public's attitudes toward the LGBT community. Indeed, the final step in this long story was taken by two same-sex couples who had never been active within the LGBT community. Their action was prompted by the anti-gender movement, which, at least indirectly—and in complete contradiction to its goals—contributed to Slovenia becoming, in the summer of 2022, the first post-socialist country to introduce marriage equality.

IV.
REPRODUCTIVE
RIGHTS

DEMANDS AS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT AND ILLIBERAL POLITICS: THE CASE OF SLOVAK ANTI-ABORTION DISCOURSE

By Zuzana Maďarová

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Since 2018, Slovakia has witnessed unprecedented attacks on access to legal and safe abortion. Over the past five years, more than twenty bills have been introduced in the Parliament that have aimed either to ban abortion or to limit women's possibility of terminating their pregnancies. Under [the current law](#)—in force since 1986—abortion is allowed in the first 12 weeks of gestation upon written request of the pregnant woman, who does not need to provide any justification for her decision. Similarly to other [post-socialist countries](#), the abortion law began to be challenged very soon after the regime change in 1989. A few barriers [were introduced](#) in the 2000s, including an obligatory 48-hour waiting period, compulsory counseling, and the imposition on doctors of a duty to report women younger than 18 years old seeking an abortion. All of these are still in place. In practice, [access to abortion is even more limited](#); there is a lack of information about abortion services; many healthcare institutions do not provide abortion at all; women need to repeatedly travel sometimes more than 100 km to get abortion care; and this care is not covered by health insurance and can cost up to 400 euros.

While access to abortion has been a mobilizing but also sensitive political issue [since the early 1990s](#), always teetering on the brink of restriction, 2018 was a turning point. The global anti-gender movement provided a discursive and structural opportunity for old conservative actors, as well as for new populist, anti-establishment, far-right, and even fascist MPs, who accelerated and strengthened their actions against abortion. Sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly access to abortion, has thus become one of the topics pursued by anti-gender politics that [has resonated in Slovakia the most](#), together with the *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (known as the Istanbul Convention) and the human rights of LGBTQIA+ people.

A strong opposition formed against the efforts to restrict abortion. An anti-fascist initiative; feminist and queer organizations; and individuals around the country and beyond organized street protests and workshops and wrote repeatedly to MPs. A new civic initiative, *We Won't Be Silent*, connected various actors. Besides using more traditional advocacy tools, this movement also reclaimed the public space and played with symbols. Allies were asked to bring wooden spoons, pans, pots, and brooms to the streets and to declare their civil disobedience. “We are here to rethink what is often considered to be taken for granted, such as the presence, bodies, and work of women,” declared a speaker at the street protest in Bratislava. As [Veronika Valkovičová and I described](#), the aim “was to move beyond the individual framework, to address a variety of structural social inequalities and link them to the protest.” Sexual and reproductive justice was approached and presented as an issue of broader social justice, care, and solidarity. And it has had implications for the anti-abortion discourse itself.

Between 2018 and 2023, we observed two shifts in introduced bills and amendments: a discursive shift and a shift in parliamentary support. While early bills talked about irresponsible women who kill children to pursue their careers, more recent ones have been presented as supporting pregnant women in difficult situations. Whereas the former bills never passed the first reading in the parliament, the latter ones were only one vote away from passing the last reading and are, in 2023, still on the parliamentary agenda.

Therefore, this article examines the discursive development of the Slovak anti-abortion bills introduced between 2018 and 2023 and their parliamentary support in the broader context of the discourse of anti-gender actors and the strong feminist resistance. I argue that this case sheds light on the connection between anti-gender and illiberal politics, as well as the potential opposition to these global developments.

The Argumentation of Anti-Abortion Bills

The initial anti-abortion bills in 2018 were presented by the neofascist party Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (People's Party Our Slovakia, further ĽSNS), which has introduced the same or similar bills every six months since then.¹ [The party's aim](#) is to “tighten abortion policy in Slovakia and ban arbitrary and unjustified abortions.” According to the explanatory reports of these bills, the current situation is a result of Bolshevik materialism and liberal egoism; the social argument is not valid anymore, and potential mothers terminate their pregnancies because of their careers and debauched lifestyle. Therefore—the story goes—MPs seek to protect

¹ If the law does not gain support in Parliament, according to the Rules of Procedure of the Slovak Parliament, another vote on the same matter cannot be held for at least six months.

unborn children, who comprise the most vulnerable social group. Moreover, the bill is supposed to change the negative demographic trend observed in Slovakia and support the pension system in the long run. The argumentation of this parliamentary group has not changed over time.

Another stable element in the anti-abortion fight has been the bill introduced every six months since 2018 by MP Richard Vašečka, who entered the Parliament on the party ticket of the strongest government party, OĽANO. In [the explanatory report](#), he acknowledges that the issue of abortion is sensitive and it is not possible to achieve the desired state: a complete abortion ban. However, the report continues, it is necessary to eliminate discrimination against unborn children, and in particular unborn children with disabilities. At the same time, the draft law claims to protect women who are being forced to terminate their pregnancies by family members, partners, or even medical staff. Vašečka has presented his bill as the first step down the long road to an abortion ban. Similarly to ĽSNS, Vašečka has been presenting almost the same explanatory report for over 5 years.

None of these bills have ever passed the first reading in the Parliament, however. When they were first introduced in 2018, they met with strong opposition from human rights and feminist civil society organizations, civic initiatives, and individuals. [These groups' open letter to MPs in 2018](#) combined arguments about the human rights of women—such as the right to decide freely the number and timing of one's children, the right to health, and the right to life—with arguments about the need to respect and trust women, and to provide effective solutions to the everyday problems of individuals and families in the country. Their goal was to argue that while the number of abortions in the country has been decreasing, people are struggling with issues that are not being addressed by political representatives.

In 2019 there was a slight shift in the argumentation of anti-abortion actors. A group of MPs introduced [an anti-abortion bill](#) “to improve social and family legislation” and “to contribute to the protection of life from conception, to assist pregnant women who find themselves in a difficult life situation, and to make the mediation of foster family care more effective.” Besides imposing restrictions on abortion, the bill also aimed to facilitate anonymous births and adoption for employed women and students. The main goal moved closer to addressing the social and practical aspects of unwanted pregnancies. Other bills introduced around this time claimed to improve access to information for pregnant women and thus aimed to prolong the mandatory waiting period. These included the so-called “heartbeat bill,” presented as an effort “to ban the advertisement of abortion” and “to provide sufficient information to women seeking

abortion.” The latter passed two readings in the Parliament before being rejected following strenuous protests from international bodies such as the European Parliament and the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe; international and Slovak civil society organizations; street protestors; and other individual and collective popular initiatives across the country.

The feminist opposition argued that the anti-abortion fight was becoming disguised as social support. It addressed the particularities of each presented bill and combined human rights argumentation with calls for solidarity and social and economic support for women and families. “We will not be silent about the fact that motherhood and parenthood as such should not entail a risk of poverty for anyone. We will not be silent about the need to improve the living conditions of women and families. We will not be silent about the fact that contraception should not be a luxury. We will not be silent about the need for quality sex education or the need to provide unbiased information on family planning, nor will we be silent about the need for dignified and respectful pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal care,” went one of the speeches at a street protest by the civic initiative *We Won’t Be Silent*.

However, 2020 brought a new parliamentary effort presented as a bill to protect pregnant women. “The debate on support for pregnant women and mothers has been long-standing, but to date, it has received only scant attention in legislation. The proposed amendment aims to create support measures for a woman who is considering applying for an abortion. The amendment is intended to give the woman a realistic opportunity to decide after considering all the information available and the options available to her to direct her life responsibly. The proposed ban on advertising is intended to preserve a woman’s autonomy and freedom of choice,” states the explanatory report.

The bill highlighted the actual social problems of women and families in the country: having children increases the risk of poverty, one-parent families have trouble making ends meet, and there is a lack of care services for disabled children. However, instead of offering solutions, it introduced several “band-aids” for these holes in the vulnerable social system. For instance, the bill did not propose to increase the one-time financial support that women currently get after giving birth, only to divide it into two parts, with the first half to be paid in the twelfth week of pregnancy. Similarly, the lack of crisis housing and other related services was not addressed in the bill; instead, it was just stated that crisis housing should be available to pregnant women and their children. Specific issues related to inclusive education, health care, and other care services for children with disabilities

remained untouched by the bill, although it did promise a new one-off payment to women who gave birth to a child with a disability. These measures therefore seem more like the state financing births than actual social support.

Despite the insufficient solutions, what seemed to matter was an improved framing of the bill. No longer was the presented aim to restrict abortion. Instead, the goals—as presented by MPs—were to protect and financially support women, to improve their social situation and access to information, and to deal with the poverty of families. These issues resonated in society and the media not only because they reflected actual social issues, but also because they are usually politically ignored and underestimated. Even insufficient measures are considered better than nothing.

What we observed in the case of the anti-abortion efforts was the construction of an equivalential chain where the promise to protect life also represented seemingly unrelated promises concerned with cultural recognition, material redistribution, and political representation.

The Illiberal Offer in the Anti-Gender Discourse

To explain this argument, I will look at the broader discourse of anti-gender actors. In an [analysis](#) I conducted with Pavol Hardoš, we argued that anti-gender discourse in Slovakia (2014-2020) created an equivalential chain in which demands for cultural recognition, material redistribution, and political representation could be identified. To date, this nexus has been largely overlooked, as research into anti-gender politics mostly focuses on those aspects that most obviously relate to gender equality policies and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people and women: opposition to the concept of gender, gender stereotypes, sex education, same-sex marriage, etc. So what else can we observe in the demands for the protection of life articulated by anti-gender actors in Slovakia between 2014 and 2020?

Figure 1. The equivalential chain of demands—protection of life

Protection of life		
Cultural recognition	Material distribution	Political representation
Protection of the right to life from conception to natural death	“Support of social reproduction” and “improving the quality of life”	Individual freedom and state autonomy
Reproduction of the Slovak nation and solution to demographic crises		Political voice and representation
Protection of children	Respect, social, and economic support for pregnant women	
Protection of pregnant women	Economic support for poor (employed) women and families	
Protection of the current structures of society and protection of the “civilization”	Social and material support for elderly and sick people	
Family mainstreaming		
Psychological and material support for women who have been raped		
Liberating society from Communist legislation and neomarxism		

It is not surprising that anti-gender actors—citing the Constitution, Bible, and moral code—demanded protection of the right to life from conception to natural death. As they recognized life from conception, unborn children were argued to be the most vulnerable group in society, as they had no voice. Anti-gender actors adopted the vocabulary of human rights and employed the argumentation of women’s and LGBTQIA+ rights used by civil society against discrimination and injustice. They demanded the protection of children—both unborn and born—and their rights. They deployed a similar strategy to demand the protection of pregnant women. Women were constructed as at risk of being physically and emotionally hurt by abortion or at risk of being forced to terminate their pregnancies against their will. Therefore, the anti-gender discourse went, steps needed to be taken to prevent family members or medical staff from putting pressure on women and to create sufficient space for women to make their own decisions, which should be respected. The assumption that women would not want to terminate their pregnancies if they had a choice underpinned many of the arguments presented. Preventing/restricting abortion was also

considered to be a question of national and European identity: Slovak children were described as part of an old European civilization that should be protected from non-Catholic nations and immigrants coming from the East. Such a construction enables nationalist, ethno-populist, far-right, and anti-abortion discourses to overlap. These demands for cultural recognition relate to discussions about *who* should be considered a member of a community (un/born child, pregnant woman, white/non-white, or Slovak/foreign pregnant woman).

Other demands articulated under the umbrella demand for protection of life connect cultural recognition with material redistribution. These include demands such as psychological and material support for women who have been raped, support for women who do not want to have children (including anonymous childbirth, financial support, and housing), etc. Other demands focus solely on material support, requesting better family policies, economic support for poor (employed) women and families, social and material support for elderly and sick people, and improving “quality of life” for families. These social and economic demands relate to inequalities in Slovakia and the everyday experiences of many people, including unaffordable housing, insufficient social networks, and an individualized and feminized system of care. In the political arena, these issues have remained unaddressed for years. Moreover, the only political party in the parliament (and, between 2020 and 2022, in the government) that has systematically supported access to safe and legal abortion and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people is Sloboda a solidarita (Freedom and solidarity), which pursues individualist and [business-oriented policies](#). An illustration of the party’s approach can be found in its leader’s media claims:

This is the malaise of all political parties today—more redistribution, giving away....We say that it is not good when the state gets bigger and bigger and bigger and when it organizes people’s lives more and more. We say, let us do it the other way. Let’s give people freedom, let’s allow them to better create values. (TA3, 2016)

Therefore, while the political agenda pursuing the recognition of “traditional families” was actively connected with social and economic issues, the agenda supporting sexual and reproductive justice, as well as the recognition of LGBTQIA+ people, was rather vocally supported by political actors pursuing neoliberal and austerity policies.

The last set of demands that can be identified in the anti-gender discourse in Slovakia stresses individual and state autonomy and is built around opposition to the EU, UN, and other potential international institutions

that supposedly do not respect “Slovak traditional values.” Claiming to represent the authentic voice of the Slovak people, those who articulate this set of demands request representation in the national and international political arena.

In this consolidated chain of demands, the demand to protect life was not mere resentment and demand for cultural recognition of “unborn children,” but rather represented further demands for material redistribution and political representation. In the process of repeated articulation of various demands, the anti-gender actors named some of the insecurities that were created [in the process of economic and political transformation](#) that followed the fall of the state-socialist regime. They addressed the failures of the global liberal order and neoliberal policies and created a new political, cultural, and social alternative. When demanding the protection of life (and, similarly, the protection of family and other demands), the anti-gender actors formulated an “[illiberal offer](#)” based on such values as family, paid work, and nation.

The Connection between Anti-Gender Politics and Illiberalism

It is this equivalential chain of demands, constructed as an “illiberal offer,” that connects anti-gender politics and illiberalism. Pointing to the failures of liberalism and its cultural and economic policies, anti-gender politics “proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity,” as Marlene Laruelle [concludes](#). The shift from politics to culture—identified by Laruelle as one of the five features of illiberalism—seems to be more complex. In the analyzed anti-gender discourse, actors sometimes framed political issues in terms of culture (different reasons for abortion), but at other times politicized issues that liberal or progressive actors had articulated in terms of morality (such as the [human rights consensus](#)). Thus, the interplay between politics and morality seems to be shaped by both progressive and illiberal actors.

The case of anti-abortion discourse in Slovakia illustrates the connection between anti-gender and illiberal politics, a connection that extends [beyond Slovak borders](#). It provides insight into the concrete demands of illiberal politics and suggests that a new collective subject is constructed around these demands. The new (illiberal) collective subject is internally diverse and politically fluid, as it is constructed not around identities but rather around needs and demands. If we take this understanding seriously, it necessarily calls into question the current opposition to both anti-gender and illiberal politics and suggests that a complex progressive offer needs to be made as an alternative—one that would be centered around unmet needs and political demands articulated across populations.

"REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS IN DANGER?" REFLECTIONS FROM THE SEMI- PERIPHERY

By Lidia Balogh

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As a researcher living in [a semi-peripheral country](#), Hungary, I could not escape noticing that something was happening with "reproductive rights" globally, at least on the discursive level, when in the middle of this summer I received an invitation from a local students' initiative to deliver a keynote speech at a [Model UN session](#) (an educational simulation event where participants play the role of UN delegates attempting to find solutions to real-world problems). They proposed a topic: "Reproductive Rights in Danger." I found it astounding that the title was formulated as a warning, which might discourage deliberation. Beyond this, the phrasing of the title made me reflect on a number of issues; in light of my recent experiences, it appeared to be a symptom of an emerging international trend rather than a stylistic preference of Hungarian high-school students.

A Vague Term and the Contemporary Abortion Debate

To start with, there is the conceptual vagueness behind the key term "reproductive rights." It can mean a number of things in different contexts. It is used for various advocacy purposes: to make a claim for access to affordable or free prenatal care, adequate and dignified maternity care, information about family planning, means of contraception, screening and cure of diseases affecting the reproductive organs, medically assisted reproduction, or abortion; and to assert the right to be free from forced marriage, child marriage, or commercial reproductive exploitation. A universally accepted definition of reproductive rights is missing, due not simply to the neglect of the international community, but to the lack of consensus on many aspects. To give an example: for some, the realization of reproductive rights includes that nobody's reproductive capacity is commodified by society; for others, it means that everybody is entitled to pursue their individual desire to have a child by buying gametes or hiring a surrogate. Considering its conceptual vagueness and the lack of consensus behind it, we may even suspect that the term "reproductive rights" is sometimes used as a device of "[calculated ambivalence](#)" (a discursive strategy of political rhetoric)—or as a euphemism for "access to abortion."

According to a [leftist critique](#), the neoliberal policies that fall under the umbrella term of reproductive rights are directed toward the sole objective of increasing individuals' performance in the market economy; in this context, the discourse relating to abortion stresses individual choices, without considering whether or not the affected individuals, namely pregnant women, were provided real alternatives to abortion.

Getting back to the Model UN session organized by Hungarian high-school students, I was obviously invited to talk there about the issue of abortion, under the vague term of “reproductive rights,” on the occasion of a recent development in the US—in our globalized world, waves stirred up there are likely to reach shore on the other side of the ocean. As we know, on June 24, 2022, the United States Supreme Court issued a ruling related to abortion in [Jackson v. Dobbs](#), overturning the almost 50-year-old ruling handed down on January 22, 1973, in [Roe v. Wade](#). The significance of such a legal development may not be obvious to those living in a non-federal country, but in short, the Roe v. Wade ruling considered access to abortion as something that should be guaranteed by constitutional principles and introduced a trimester regime (meaning that specific rules may apply to different stages of pregnancy), while another ruling issued on the same day ([Doe v. Bolton](#)) set the precedent that a broad conceptualization of maternal health—including physical, emotional, psychological, familial, and age factors—should be considered in abortion regulations. According to [critics](#), the latter ruling became the actual rule, leaving space for interpretations that would provide women throughout the U.S. with access to abortion on demand virtually any time during the pregnancy. The recent Jackson v. Dobbs ruling overturned the previous interpretation regarding the constitutionality of abortion and returned the authority to regulate abortion access to individual U.S. states.

Over the decades, two basic positions have been articulated in the U.S. around the issue of abortion. Using the debaters' self-assigned terms, there are the “pro-choice” side (insisting on women's right to abortion) and the “pro-life” side (insisting on unborn individuals' right to life). The debate is manifested in huge social movements: on the one hand, the [March for Life](#) initiative has organized annual large-scale rallies in Washington, D.C., to protest the Roe v. Wade ruling since 1974; on the other hand, graphic media reports emerged about protests organized by the [Women's March](#) initiative in May 2022, when a draft of the Supreme Court's ruling in the Jackson v. Dobbs case was leaked.

Without aiming to relativize the essence of the abortion debate, which is eternal and normative in nature, I consider it necessary to contextualize the current U.S. debate when discussing the issue in Hungary, especially among

young people, as the risk of getting trapped in a [virtual echo chamber](#) is especially high in a country where public moral debates have been largely absent from this field—as I will show below. As a first step of contextualization, I recommend taking a look at the Hungarian history of abortion regulation from the final stage of World War II to the present. Second, I suggest considering that the world, including the US, has changed in a number of relevant respects since the *Roe v. Wade* ruling.

A Retrospective Look at Decisive Moments and Considerations in Hungary

A brief overview of key moments in local history gives some sense of how the issue of abortion formed the lived reality of previous generations of Hungarians, whether directly or indirectly. Moreover, certain stakes and references in the current globalized debate, stirred by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, become more comprehensible by identifying the considerations that have shaped the local policy framework and legislation over time. Without attempting to perform a full mapping exercise, let me point out a number of resemblances (*highlighted in italics*).

I would first mention an event of collective trauma from the first months of 1945: during the siege of Budapest, [Soviet soldiers committed rape](#) against Hungarian women on a mass scale, which led the authorities to suspend the ban on abortions temporarily. (*Note that it is a rather common feature of today's abortion regulations that in cases of pregnancies resulting from crime, the general moral considerations are suspended.*) Not much later, in the unfolding state-Socialist era, access to abortion was provided on non-restrictive terms, except for a [period in 1952–1953](#) when a near-total ban on abortions was enforced.

This initiative is associated with Ms. Anna Ratkó, Hungary's first female minister, and with a slogan: “For an unwed woman, it's a glory to give birth; for a married woman, it's an obligation.” It sounds astounding, but we must not forget about the country's population loss due to World War II, particularly among men of marriageable age. The political ambition to increase the birth rate was then translated into a negative financial incentive: in 1953–1956, a “tax on childlessness” was imposed on the incomes of women under 45 and men under 50 who had no offspring.

Meanwhile, the regulation of abortion followed the tendency in the Soviet Union. (*Note that in Hungary there are collective memories of a foreign empire that dictated the rules by which society was governed.*) In this system, access to abortion was practically very wide. The rates were the highest in the 1960s and early 1970s, when abortions outnumbered live births. At a meeting of his party's Political Council, Mr. János Kádár, the *de facto* leader of Hungary between

1956 and 1988, [characterized](#) the situation with dismay: “We have maternity centers with signs that say “Maternity Center,” but in reality, these are angel-making [a euphemism for abortion] factories run by the authorities.” He was apparently [worried](#) both about the possible health consequences of abortion (including increased risks of infertility and premature birth in the future) and about the moral implications, namely that abortion may be an act of “harmful selfishness that violates the interests of the society.” (*Note that both of Kádár’s concerns appear in the pro-life discourse today.*)

In 1973, when information about a planned comprehensive population policy, motivated by demographic and economic concerns, was leaked, a grassroots opposition group launched a [petition](#) and collected signatures to oppose the government plan, which was believed to include a total ban on abortions. Eventually, the new population policy came into force; it featured positive incentives to encourage childbirth, such as improved maternity allowance, parental leave arrangements, and housing benefits for families. A new abortion regulation was also introduced, with access determined on the basis of “productivity”: by default, unwed and married women who had already given birth to at least three children were provided with access to abortion, while married women who were either childless or had only one or two children had access only in exceptional cases. During the last stage of state-Socialism, access to abortion was widened several times via decrees.

After the political change, in [1991](#), when Hungary’s new Constitutional Court was asked by petitioners to rule on the constitutionality of the decree governing abortion access, the Court found that there was no clear guidance in the text of the Constitution on the starting-point of life and that it therefore fell to Parliament to legislate on the issue of abortion. In this way, the Court avoided taking a stance on the core moral dilemma; but claimed the issue to be regulated not at the level of a governmental decree by those in power at a given time, but at the level of a parliamentary act by a democratically elected legislative body that represented the plurality of citizens. (*Note that this solution by the Hungarian Constitution Court resembles the one employed by the U.S. Supreme Court in Jackson v. Dobbs: instead of deciding the issue on the basis of constitutional principles, both courts left the final decision to the political community.*)

The following year, the Parliament adopted the Act on the Protection of Fetal Life. This may sound like a strange title for an abortion regulation, but the Act’s preamble stresses that, by default, fetal life should be respected and protected; moreover, the act itself includes provisions for prenatal care. As for the breadth of access to abortion, this act took the same line as the decrees from the last stage of state-Socialism: abortion was made available

during the first months of pregnancy in certain circumstances, including those cases where a woman was facing a “crisis situation.” In [1998](#), this provision was challenged at the Constitutional Court; eventually, the Court found that the definition of a “crisis situation”—“desperate mental, physical or social condition and this endangers the healthy development of the fetus”—was not adequate because, paradoxically, it referred to the interests of the fetus. The definition was eventually amended in 2000; it now reads: “a pregnant woman’s serious crisis situation [...] is understood as [a situation] that causes physical or psychical impairments or social infeasibility.” This amendment of the definition clarified that the interests and perspectives of the woman, not those of the fetus, are to be considered in a decision about abortion. *(Note that some contemporary pro-choice activists, in the U.S. and elsewhere, claim to be advocating on behalf of voiceless fetuses who would allegedly choose to be aborted rather than to be born into a poor family, a community facing discrimination, a non-welcoming environment, or a disabled body.)*

During the thirty years since the transition to democracy, robust social movements, like those in the US, have not evolved, yet there have been some citizens’ initiatives in Hungary relating to the issue of abortion (on both sides). These include a pro-life endeavor that gained high public visibility in 1998 when an NGO tried to intervene, by means of [private law](#), in a case involving a 13-year-girl from the village of Dávod who had been impregnated by statutory rape: the NGO made a deposit for the benefit of the unborn child and managed to have assigned a legal guardian who argued that by this arrangement, a financial interest had been created on behalf of the fetus that would be realized only upon birth, as the sum of money would be waiting for the baby only if he/she made it to birth alive. *(Note that questions relating to the legal personhood of fetuses are prominent in current abortion debates in the U.S. as well.)* However, an abortion was ultimately performed. In 2016, a pro-choice demonstration in Budapest led to a lengthy series of legal proceedings that culminated in a Constitutional Court [decision](#) in 2021 and ended with an apology: the participants in a [street performance](#) protesting against the planned restrictions on abortion access in Poland expressed regret for offending the religious sensitivity of Catholics by imitating Holy Communion with candies labeled as “abortion pills.”

We may add at this point that abortion regulations have not developed in the same way in Poland and Hungary, albeit that both countries are considered to have been [defined by illiberal politics](#) since the 2010s ([from 2015 and 2010, respectively](#)). In Poland, the government eventually enforced a constitutional court ruling that further restricted access to abortion (by removing the previous rule that fetuses with severe impairments could be aborted) in 2021. Meanwhile, in Hungary, nothing of such significance has happened in this field since the 2011 adoption of the

country's new constitution, which explicitly [claims](#) that "every human being shall have the right to life and human dignity" in the same sentence with the provision that "the life of the fetus shall be protected from the moment of conception," an arrangement that concern Hungarian supporters of the pro-choice stand. Yet, some symbolic political steps have been taken by the Hungarian government, including its signing of an international [pro-life declaration](#) in 2020. On the policy level, two relevant developments may be mentioned: the abortion pill, which was available for a while in Hungary during the authorization process, was [eventually](#) not licensed in 2012; and from September 2022, by decree, women seeking an abortion must be [presented](#) with evidence of the fetus' vital functions (in the form of cardiac activity or an ultrasound image).

Relevant Situational and Discursive Changes since *Roe v. Wade*

Having reviewed certain significant moments of Hungarian history, I recommend considering relevant respects in which the world, including the U.S.-led discourse, seems to have changed since the *Roe v. Wade* ruling relating to the issue of abortion.

First, I would suggest that developments in the field of science and technology should be taken into account. In the early 1970s, prenatal [ultrasound](#) scanning was not as prevalent as it is (at least in developed countries) today, not to mention that the image resolution capacity of these devices has improved a lot over the decades. Through visualization, the concept of intrauterine life has become more vivid, challenging the suggestion that the early stage of pregnancy involves just a "[newly implanted clump of cells](#)." Moreover, the question of viability, understood as the point at which a baby can survive outside the womb, has always been at the center of abortion regulation disputes (including U.S. Supreme Court cases like *Roe v. Wade* and [Planned Parenthood v. Casey](#)), and advances in medical technology and treatment have made premature babies viable from an earlier point (at least in developed countries). Practically speaking, this means that in places where late-term abortions are available, a fetus of 24 weeks' gestation may be administered a lethal heart injection *in utero* in order not to be pulled out alive, while in the same hour another fetus of the same gestational age may be delivered by emergency Cesarean section, with the medical staff of the neonatal intensive care unit making heroic efforts to save the premature baby's life.

To conceptualize this on the level of moral philosophy, choosing an abortion after the actual point of viability cannot be justified merely by referring to a woman's right to stop her offspring from using her uterus, because a choice like this implies the position that the offspring's life in itself, even outside the womb, is not desired. We may also mention here

that the development of science in the field of medically assisted reproduction has set up new ethical challenges relating to the conceptualization of human life: just think about the real-life dilemma that hits some parents with an *in vitro*-conceived baby when they receive official notification from the IVF clinic asking them to decide whether [the unused embryos](#) created during fertility treatment—their child's potential siblings—should be stored, discarded, donated for research, or donated to other individuals. And when it comes to the concern that restricted access to legal abortion will lead to an increase in maternal death resulting from illegal abortions, the current availability of the abortion pill (shippable even by mail) likely makes it an alternative to the infamous methods of "back alley" or self-induced abortion, like using a straightened wire coat hanger or a knitting needle. (The latter tools are still depicted on signs held at pro-choice demonstrations, although this symbolism is [considered outdated by some activists](#).)

Second, I would highlight certain developments that are unmistakable even for someone who is following the U.S. public discourse from the outside: the change in political statements regarding abortion from the side that has been associated with the pro-choice stance. Not so long ago, in 2005, (then-Senator) Hillary Clinton acknowledged that abortion meant a ["sad, even tragic choice to many, many women,"](#) and in her 2008 campaign, she [claimed](#) that "[a]bortion should be safe, legal, and rare"—a slogan first introduced to Democrats' political rhetoric by President Bill Clinton. That approach has shifted: in 2022, media images showed protests against the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* where the signs read: ["Abortion on Demand and Without Apology."](#) In other words, where abortion used to be presented as a grim phenomenon to be reduced by prevention measures, it is now presented in the mainstream pro-choice discourse as a healthcare service that should be made as widely available as possible. This shift is reflected in some segments of popular-commercial culture.

In 2017, a [Teen Vogue magazine](#) article advertised gift ideas for post-abortive teenage girls—presenting abortion as a normal coming-of-age experience (and an occasion to buy or expect gifts). In 2021, a crowdsourcing campaign was started to disseminate an illustrated children's book, ["What's Abortion Anyway?"](#); its authors "believe in building a world for kids and adults where abortion is normalized as another outcome of pregnancy, just like miscarriage and birth." The summer of 2022, around the time of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, witnessed a series of manifestations of this approach. In a magazine article entitled ["What Mommy Does at Work,"](#) an abortion provider shared how she explained abortion to her 4-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son. On a [late-night TV show](#), the CEO of Planned Parenthood, the United States' largest abortion

provider, opined that “it’s, kind of, actually sexy when people support reproductive rights.” [Cosmopolitan magazine](#) featured glamorous celebrities supporting the pro-choice stance, one of whom shared the story of her recent abortion while on concert tour: “I went to Planned Parenthood, where they gave me the abortion pill. It was easy. Everyone deserves that kind of access.” Not only is the accessibility of abortion in the abstract celebrated, but the real-life [decisions of individuals](#) who choose to have an abortion—“so they can be a better parent,” for example—are also praised.

Conclusion: Diverging Conceptions of Human Dignity

Last but not least, I would suggest my audience think about the core concept of the human rights theory, namely [human dignity](#), and the diverging approaches to it. Although there is an emerging tendency to prioritize a purely autonomy-based, individualistic understanding of dignity, the other dignity concept—which includes the element of relationality, meaning relatedness to each other—has deep roots in human rights thinking. We may not forget that the pro-life stance may be based on the latter understanding of dignity and can be argued from a [secular](#) human-rights perspective combined with different political positions, including the [progressive](#) one. If we look at the U.S. scene, there are pro-life activists who frame the cause in feminist terms, contending that “[women deserve better than abortion](#)” and that the issue of crisis pregnancy should be addressed by providing comprehensive support for mothers and their children—based on the principle that “[every human being should live a life free from violence, from the womb to the tomb](#).” Indeed, there is a [long tradition of pro-life feminism](#) in the US. Moreover, the pro-life stance is articulated in major youth initiatives with [slogans like](#) “I am the pro-life generation” or “The future is anti-abortion” that attract both young women and men.

My conclusion would be that despite all the tendencies and changes in the world, including the human rights discourse, there is still no unanimous consensus among the global community that abortion access should be considered an uncontestable and unrestrictable human right—as evidenced by a September 2022 [plenary meeting](#) of the UN General Assembly during the debate on a [draft resolution](#) that included the phrase “safe abortion.” (Notably, Hungary was among the countries that did not take a pro-life stance on this non-binding document.) Turning back to the initial impetus of my reflections—the invitation from the student group—I claim that when it comes to a Model UN session, which should be an exercise in seeking agreement, the issue of abortion should be debated in the context of human rights instead of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* being framed, in a one-sided way, as a cause for moral panic.

“CULTURE OF LIFE VERSUS CULTURE OF DEATH” – THE CULTURE WAR OF THE GERMAN “PRO-LIFE” MOVEMENT

by Kirsten Achtelek

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The “pro-life” movement is part of the extreme right that has gained momentum in the U.S. due to the Supreme Court’s decision to overrule *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which granted women with unwanted pregnancies the right to an abortion. The German “pro-life” movement desires to make a similar impact but simultaneously tries to hide this motivation to appear moderate. Leaders often claim that they only push for a real abiding of the law, not for a tightening of it.

This might seem moderate, even liberal from the outside. However, Germany’s regulation of abortion is particularly complicated and, of course, the Right’s claim is not entirely true but is rather an acknowledgment of the political atmosphere surrounding the topic. Although they wage a cultural war on women’s and LGBTIQ rights, the leaders of the Right try to pretend that they are only fighting for the rights of “unborn babies,” people with disabilities, and mothers-to-be. So, let’s dig deeper into the situation in Germany, the discourse around disability and prenatal testing, and the rhetoric of the “pro-life” movement.

Abortion Laws

There are many myths around German abortion laws, with most people believing that abortion is legal, when in fact this is only true in a few rare cases. Even on a [progressive website](#) mapping abortion laws, Germany is listed as abortion is possible “on request.” People with more insight still believe that the current law is a “good compromise” that serves everyone.

Abortion is generally illegal and punishable by a fine or imprisonment of up to three years under Section 218 of Germany’s Criminal Code. Until the 12th week of pregnancy, a pregnant person can seek an abortion without being punished after compulsory counselling and a three-day waiting period. These kinds of abortions are “unlawful but not punishable.”

The obligation to seek counselling before an abortion is regulated in Section 219 of the Criminal Code and specified in the Pregnancy Conflict Act, but their formulations contradict each other. The Criminal Code states that “counselling serves to protect unborn life” and should “encourage the woman to continue the pregnancy,” while the Conflict of Pregnancy Act states that counselling “serves the protection of unborn life” but should be “free from any bias” and “encourage and inspire understanding, not instruct or patronize.”

Only abortions related to cases of rape or where the health of the pregnant person is in danger are strictly legal. Historically, there have been two attempts to legalize abortion and make it accessible within the first weeks of pregnancy. The Bundestag voted for a “Fristenregelung” in 1974 and again in 1993; making abortion up to 12 weeks legal. However, both times the conservative party, which then was the ideological home of the large parts of the “pro-life” movement, appealed to the Supreme Court. The Court declared the laws unconstitutional because the “unborn life” had priority over the pregnant woman's right to self-determination.

Stigmatization by criminal law means that increasingly fewer doctors in Germany perform abortions and that unintended pregnant people in some parts of the country must travel far to obtain an abortion. Some even go to the Netherlands on account of the country's more liberal laws and doctors, who are willing to perform late-term abortions. Meanwhile, anti-abortion activists feel justified in their hostility towards doctors and women with unwanted pregnancies.

The obligation to carry to term is a violation of human dignity, [professor of law at Humboldt University in Berlin, Ulrike Lembke, argues](#). The state turns the pregnant woman into an object in order to fulfil its duty to protect. According to Lembke, in a legal system that guarantees the dignity, integrity, and autonomy of women as well, the current abortion laws are incompatible with the constitution.

Disability Issues

The Bundestag voted in favor of the current so-called counselling regulation in 1995. At that time, the embryopathic indication, i.e., if the fetus has an impairment, was removed due to pressure from churches and disability associations who argued that permission to abort on the basis of a fetus's disability was discriminatory. This amendment makes German abortion laws a special case, as the embryopathic indication exists in all other countries with relatively liberal abortion regulations.

When the embryopathic indication was removed in Germany, part of the disability movement assumed that this would limit the abortion of impaired fetuses solely on the basis of being disabled. However, this was not the case. Since then, pregnancies can still be legally terminated if it is assumed that a disability of the child-to-be would place an unreasonable burden on the pregnant woman. Assuming this pregnancy endangers her mental health, the medical indication takes effect. Thus, since the reform of § 218, the medical indication serves decidedly as a "catch-all" indication for abortions previously indicated on the basis of embryopathy.

Doctors are relatively quick to assume that life with a disabled child would be an unreasonable burden. If, however, the pregnant woman herself has psychological problems, is depressed or suicidal, doctors tend to assume that this can be treated in ways other than by an abortion. For this, it is much easier to obtain permission for an abortion on the grounds that a disabled fetus would threaten the pregnant person's health, than when her health is endangered by other causes. This unequal treatment results from the image of women and widespread ideas about disability.

In 2017, [the women's health organization Pro Familia pointed out](#) the medical indication is "mostly only issued ... if there are fetal malformations, but not due to any other severe impairment of the woman's mental health." After the 12th week of pregnancy, "in many regions of Germany it is very difficult to find both doctors who issue an indication and facilities that recognize it and perform an abortion in advanced pregnancy due to the woman's psychological situation if there is no fetal malformation."

Feminists also often make this assumption about the above-average burden of a child with disabilities. Even though feminists usually point to the lack of resources and aids to justify this assumption, large parts of the movement do not sufficiently address its own fears of weakness and dependency and its own internalized hostility towards the disabled, which make living with a disabled child seem unreasonable. The Pro-Choice Movement criticizes the fundamental punishability of abortion and demands the abolition of the criminal law paragraphs in Germany. It abstains largely from the uncomfortable questions around prenatal diagnostics and late term abortions. Feminists with disabilities have criticized these gaps and the refusal of abled bodied feminists to engage in a meaningful discussion about these topics since the 1980s.

The idea that a disability is necessarily associated with suffering and pain, and therefore is unbearable for all potentially involved (the disabled child and the parents), is so widespread and normalized that many people find it difficult to perceive it as problematic and ableist.

For highly religious “pro-life” Christians, suffering and pain are considered a good thing, sent as a task from God. This mindset makes them not less ableist in their stance against prenatal diagnostics and abortion than non-Christians, on the contrary: they also see disabled people as a burden, but a heaven-sent one, which they happily carry.

The Debate about Prenatal Tests

Prenatal examinations of the fetus are a standard part of care for pregnant women in the western countries today, and in Germany, health insurance covers the cost of many tests. Although there is medical counsel about which markers and impairments the respective tests look for, this takes place in the logic that these tests offer the pregnant woman security and that the acquired knowledge is positive for the health of the child-to-be. However, beforehand the possible next steps are hardly ever communicated: What will happen if an impairment is actually detected?

Only in very few cases the tests pave the way for medical treatment of the fetus or can be useful for birth preparation. The vast majority of examinations only look for a deviation from the norm, for an indication of disability. For the most part, such detection has no positive effect on the child or mother-to-be—in most cases, there are simply no therapeutic measures that could be usefully applied prenatally. Therefore, in the majority of cases, the pregnant person is faced only with the decision whether or not to abort the child-to-be, whose wellbeing was the motivation for the test.

Prenatal tests look for possible defects and damage in the child-to-be and thus promote a deficit-oriented view. With increasing tests, increasingly more targeted disabilities appear preventable and highly problematic instead of normal and a variation of life. By funding the tests, the targeted impairment seems bad enough that the health system is on notice. Thus, the fear of disability is normalized, not reduced.

But these problems are rarely mentioned in a doctor-patient consultation before such tests, which results in the impression that all pregnancy examinations offered are useful, if not important, for the pregnant person and their future child. This applies to an even greater extent to tests whose costs are covered by health insurances.

Since July 2022, pregnant people can use non-invasive prenatal tests (NIPT) for the genetic disabilities trisomy 13, 18, and 21 as part of their health insurance. Trisomy 21 is also known as Down Syndrome; the other two disabilities tend to be more severe. The tests are on the German market since 2012, for self-paying patients. Approval to cover these costs as part

of the health insurance comes at the same time as debates about the restricted abortion laws are re-emerging in Germany.

Pro-Life Movement

The "pro-life" movement focused on the issue of the new tests and described itself as an advocate for disabled people. Each September, the movement holds a "March for Life" rally in Berlin, gathering thousands from all over Germany and German-speaking countries. The financing of the non-invasive blood tests for trisomy 13, 18, and 21 has been an important topic ever since the beginning of public debate. The "pro-lifers" even appropriated the slogan of the disability movement "inclusion instead of selection." With this claim, people with disabilities and their relatives want to express that a well-developed health care and social system is important so that expectant parents can decide to have children with disabilities without fear of social relegation. The Christian fundamentalist movement, on the other hand, used the debate and slogan for its core goal of equating fetuses with born humans. The aim is to extend anti-discrimination policies and human rights to fetuses, which is also expressed in the slogan "inclusion also for the unborn" or "inclusion begins even before birth."

The abortion of fetuses with disabilities is a particular focus for "pro-lifers" because disabled persons are perceived as the "weakest of the weak," who need special protection. For years, the march has included signs with pictures of children with trisomy 21 and slogans such as "Responsibility instead of abortion" and "unborn + disabled = worthless?" The "pro-life" movement is clearly trying to present itself as the most important platform of the critics of prenatal diagnostics. They do not rely purely on religious arguments but incorporate those which seem to work in a secularized society.

The "pro-life" movement claims to defend disabled people, to be their sole advocate. In fact, however, the group is primarily concerned with preventing abortions. In this respect, their motives coincide with the far-right wing party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland). The movement does not care so much about disabled children, but more about using them as a token in their anti-abortion propaganda.

The "pro-life" movement wants to appear harmless, as friendly people who adhere to conservative—but by no means extreme right—values. First and foremost, they pretend to be concerned about the welfare of everyone, especially children. However, the "children" they want to protect are not yet children at all, but rather, the fetuses or children-to-be in the bodies of pregnant women.

Anti-abortion activists therefore increasingly focus on making access to this medical service more difficult and the experience as unpleasant as possible for women with unwanted pregnancies. To this end, they denounce doctors who announce on their websites that they perform abortions, stand in front of counselling centers and doctors' offices, and pray or harass women verbally and physically on site. Confronting unintentionally pregnant women with the idea that they are carrying an unborn "child" or "life," as the "pro-life" movement does, suggests that the fetus on its own has personhood status and is intended to make the woman feel guilty.

For these mostly religiously motivated people, life is in god's hands; they reject people trying to determine their own lives. They claim to follow a "culture of life," accusing people with a different lifestyle of following a "culture of death." These fundamentalist Christians are not only anti-abortionists, but they are also equally opposed to homosexuality, non-reproductive sex, non-prejudiced sex education, and the questioning of gender stereotypes.

It is, therefore, becoming increasingly important that feminist and disability movements do not allow themselves to be pitted against each other—the right to bodily self-determination and equal participation in society are, after all, among the core demands of both movements. This also requires arguing against the self-trivialization of the "pro-life" movement and to prevent them from gaining the higher moral ground. For the culture war that the left must win is, after all, a fight about a good life for everyone.

V.
DILEMMAS AND BLIND
SPOTS OF ANTIRACISM

CRITICAL WHITENESS: ON THE ABERRATIONS OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN GERMANY

by Massimo Perinelli

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This text argues for a problematization of the concepts of Critical Whiteness and related identity politics in the field of anti-racism. It aims to show that the dominant U.S. concept of white supremacy overlooks large parts of the history of European and especially German racism and, as a theory import that is gradually becoming hegemonic in Germany, even render this history invisible. I will also be arguing that racism is not an identitarian project, even if it produces identities, but a tool for distributing rights and wealth unjustly. It is not so much about affiliations and corresponding privileges as it is about the unequal rights that lead to these relationships. In the strong identity politics of recent years, this article sees instead increasingly authoritarian forms of politics, which unfortunately are not new in the history of the left.

The anti-racist movement in Germany is in a deep crisis intellectually, conceptually, and politically. This is despite the fact that an unprecedented number of people are doing solidarity work and taking to the streets in overwhelmingly large numbers to do so. The demonstration [#unteilbar](#) in Berlin in October 2018, with its quarter of a million participants, was the most impressive sign of this, along with, also in that year, the parade [We'll Come United](#), which took place in Hamburg with over 30,000 people. We'll Come United transcended all previously known dimensions of migrant self-organized demonstrations. The large mobilizations after the racist attacks and mass murders of Halle 2019 and [Hanau 2020](#), together with the Black Lives Matter movement, produced a new dynamic of migrant self-organization. Nevertheless, in contrast to the 1990s and the early 2000s, it is no longer possible to formulate a comprehensive social critique from the perspective of antiracism or to gather the movement-political left for a corresponding transformation project. At that time, driven by reunification and racist pogroms during the early 1990s, new anti-racist practices and theories were able to capture and mobilize large parts of the various civic currents by highlighting the struggles of migration and making visible the democratic moment inscribed in them.

Today, the complex of anti-racism faces unsolved problems due to the changed global situation of the last decade and the racisms that have changed as a result.

Above all, it cannot find answers to the new racist divisions opened up by anti-Muslim racism and racialized security policies in the process of European integration. Moreover, austerity policies as a war against the poor—expressed in Germany through the permanent tightening of the Hartz-IV regime, i.e., the infamous measures to deregulate the welfare state—have pushed millions of people into unsecured cheap jobs and into poverty. This regime, originally imposed by the Social Democrats-Green government at the turn of the millennium, intensified during and due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effect was that all hitherto existing notions of how exclusion, exploitation and discrimination could be reduced or even overcome in the political sphere were rendered impotent. The vision of a just society for all seems increasingly unimaginable, increasingly unthinkable.

Into this void, both theoretical and political theorems have been able to unfold, stemming from academic debates around post-colonialism, intersectionality, and gender studies and drawing primarily on U.S. texts from the 1970s, a time when the Civil Rights Movement suffered decisive defeats and, as a result, dogmatic concepts permeated the left, the women's movement, and the Black Power movement. The political effect of these debates was primarily identitarian attributions along an axis of oppression, to which a hierarchy of interpretive sovereignty was attributed according to the respective positioning.

This phenomenon, however, is not new. Rather, we often encounter an element of authoritarianism in the moment when social movements are forced to defend and stabilize gains in the face of a slowing of momentum. In these moments we see attempts to consolidate power, the formation of defensive internal group culture, of institutionalization. It is worth taking a look at history.

Authoritarian Turn of Revolutionary Movements in History

When, in the wake of World War One, the phase of revolutionary uprisings in Germany against war, Kaiser, and capitalism ended with their military suppression between 1918 and 1921, many leftist opposition elements split off from the German Communist Party (KPD). The authoritarian Bolshevization of the Communist Party led to increasingly oppose so-called left dissenters in the name of the “Einheitsfront,” a left united front, purging its ranks of internal criticism from 1923 onward.

The 1960s saw a fundamental oppositional impulse take hold of the young post-war generation. This was transmitted worldwide in revolts against the existing political, economic, and cultural conditions. In the process, a turning-away from the various Western Communist Parties and their orientation toward the Soviet Union took place. In this historical moment, identitarian positions played a subordinate role; the revolutionary moment was characterized explicitly by the belief in and desire for something that was not yet known, but nonetheless felt

tangible and within reach (in the revolutionaries' lifetimes). Not "Who are we?" but "Who do we want to be?" became the visionary impulse of this short but nevertheless formative period. In the moment where desire turns into program, driven by the disillusionment of that desire, the moment that this desire was given explicit form, specific identities, we can mark the end of the revolutionary phase. In the transition to the 1970s, this revolutionary impulse exhausted itself—paralyzed and intimidated, as it were, by bloody counterattacks. As in 1921, the time had once again come for the functionaries of various Maoist K-groups to try to gain control and organize the dying movements. In their increasing irrelevance, many leftists reversed the dynamics of movement and organization, making the former dependent on the latter. The many splinter groups fought each other fiercely.

In the late 1970s, precarious mass workers in the industrial centers of northern Italy and northern Europe said goodbye to those authoritarian K-groups and parties in favor of the new idea of Autonomia. In Western Europe, the Autonomists movement took form. This movement sought to organize politically against oppressive structures while simultaneously seeking personal experience of liberation and the realization of living utopias in liberated spaces, such as squatting houses or centers. This Operaist impulse, which was born in the militant struggles of migrant mass workers and which did not emphasize the organizational unit, but rather relied on the diverse struggles of the discontented, ended with German reunification and the intensifying attacks that took place in the national frenzy of the 1990s.

A decaying remnant of the autonomous movement in the early 1990s was the anti-Germans. Emerging from an urgently needed critical debate about left-wing national liberation movements of *völkisch* provenance and anti-Semitically tinged anti-Zionism, this movement radicalized and finally declared all Germans to belong to an extermination collective that should be abolished. The relationship to the State of Israel became the Gretchen question of entire post-autonomous and anti-fascist scenes in various cities, which subsequently disintegrated into bitterly warring factions. In this extreme reduction of the various social contradictions, left-wing fields of action were consistently denounced and attacked by anti-German groups; parts of the anti-Germans became explicitly anti-left.

It was precisely in this area that mechanisms were developed that reappear, structurally identically, in Critical Whiteness. Here, too, the concept of violence has been totalized, the power of definition expanded to the point of diffuseness, and the right to sanction generalized.

Critical Whiteness poked into the void left by the anti-racist movement of the late 1990s and 2000s. At the end of the 1990s, there were camps, debates,

interventions, and knowledge productions that could gather an entire left and—very often—succeed in overcoming the division of labor within the Left between the paternalistic care of refugees, the political intervention against structural racism, migrant self-organization as self-defense, and organized antifascism against neo-Nazis. In the field of antiracism during the era of the multitude, it was possible to address social relations as a whole and, starting from the struggle against racist stratification, to radically question class relations as well as gender relations.

In view of the new world situation, with its permanent wars in the Arab world, racism has changed globally. For Germany, this has meant that it is no longer primarily about the social subordination of migrants to secure the economic position of the majority. The country no longer needs the migrant mass worker on the assembly line and the migrant care worker in the reproductive professions to enable the majority of Germans to rise in class, as was the case from the 1950s to the 1980s. Even though this structure of exploitation remains a function of racism to this day, a new, primarily identity-forming element has been added. Anti-Muslim racism has opened a rift between migrant communities: Spaniards, Greeks, Italians, and Portuguese suddenly stand on one side, people from Turkey, the Maghreb, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq on the other. The former "Kanaks" have suddenly become Europeans, while the latter are identified as Muslims. Yet both groups have remained part of Germany's precarious underclass. With the eastward expansion of the EU after the end of the Cold War, many Eastern Europeans especially as commuter migrants and seasonal workers in care work and as harvest workers in agriculture, as well as immigrants from the post-Soviet states and refugees from the Balkan wars, were added to this mix, taking on a third position, but also becoming targets of racism. With West Germany's ties to the history of the Western hemisphere, people from Eastern Europe were considered more foreign and less European—or, as Hans-Christian Petersen puts it, [European, but not European](#). To some extent, this also affected the population of East Germany, whose history, culture, and social position remain extremely devalued to this day: not entirely without reason, some contemporaries speak of East Germany as the Mezzogiorno of Germany.

Faced with this challenge, the movement-political anti-racism of the 1990s generation—which had dealt with reunification, nationalism, and racist violence—fell into a deep crisis. A political and theoretical void opened up that has hardly been closed to this day. And precisely at the moment of the loss of this movement, authoritarian and identitarian concepts re-emerged, gaining significance—as so often in history—through exclusions and threats. We are currently witnessing this in the German context with the phenomenon of Critical Whiteness.

Concepts and Practices of Critical Whiteness

Current debates on the topic of Critical Whiteness are unsatisfactory, however, because they either pursue a critique of political forms that disregard the concepts of this approach or they work off the theoretical concepts without taking an interest in real political action.

At first glance, the engagement with CW theorems—that primarily represent a reduction of theory—illustrates their potential to make differences between various social positions and actors visible. Thus, normative belonging to the group of profiteers of racism can now be analyzed as a construct. Whiteness as an invisible norm becomes visible as a social construct and thus attackable. The historical situation of the 1960s in the U.S. showed that the identification of inequality does not have to remain descriptive but can also transport the condition of its abolition. Self-described "Third World Women" wanted not only to make clear to their white "sisters" that the common struggle against patriarchy was still preceded by a veritable racist relationship of exploitation between the women themselves, but also to draw attention to the fact that the notions of Black and white erased the experience of those women who—either as U.S. Latinas or else as women from the global periphery—were struggling against their specific relations of exploitation. The term "Third World Women" proposed at the time, or even the term "People of Color" that gained acceptance, signified an expansion of anti-racist theories and practices, an expansion of political subjects in the struggle against oppression. It globalized the fledgling perception of a significant relationship of domination at a time when very few on the left were operating with the term "racism", and it dynamized both the (male-dominated) Black Power movement and the (white-dominated) women's movement in the United States.

The reference to this intervention, for which groups like the Combahee River Collective stood in the 1970s, is, however, not applicable for German conditions because it did not expand the struggle against racism, as in the US, but rather rendered the resistance of a majority of non-Germans invisible. Whiteness—as Noel Ignatiev makes clear—is the correct term for conditions in the US, where colonial history and an economy historically based on slavery have kept Blacks at the bottom of the social ladder for more than 300 years. Germany, however, has a different history of racism. Without going into detail it is worth noting that a *völkisch* nationalism prevailed and still prevails in Germany, which went into the Battle of the Nations against the hereditary enemy France just as it carried out extermination projects against the "Slavic race" and just as it carried out genocides against the ancestral populations in its short-lived colonies in East Africa and in present-day Namibia at the beginning of the twentieth century. This nationalism is characterized by an eliminatory antiziganism and an eliminatory anti-Semitism, which industrially murdered millions of people—and,

more recently, by the racist exploitation and disenfranchisement of migrants, primarily from southern Europe.

We also see specifically German racism in the current resurgence of anti-Slavic racism, in response to the present Russian war against Ukraine. The current attempt to label refugees from Ukraine as "Europeans like us" and to play them off against the old enemy, Russia, renders invisible the fact that people from Ukraine have for decades been discriminated against and exploited in Germany, especially in body-related services, and have been treated no differently than migrants from Russia, Kazakhstan, and the many other states of the former Soviet Union, whose histories are inextricably interwoven anyway. As Hans-Christian Petersen and Jannis Panagiotidis aptly summarize in their plea for an [eastward expansion of the German debate on racism](#), the construction of the category "race" in the German context cannot be understood only through dichotomies and does not relate only to skin color.

Black Germans have endured racist experiences in this country precisely because they were and are assigned to certain stereotypical cultural spheres in the racist division of society and are exposed to racist violence. However, Black Germans occupy different social positions than African Americans working in the lowest segment of industry, service, and agriculture in the United States. In this country, such work was done by foreign and forced laborers under National Socialism and after the war in West Germany by so-called "guest workers" from Italy, Turkey, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Yugoslavia, Tunisia, Morocco, and South Korea and in East Germany by so-called "contract workers" from Algeria, Angola, China, Cuba, Mongolia, Mozambique, Poland, Hungary, and Vietnam. They are the ones who have been standing on the assembly line, disposing of the garbage, and cleaning the toilets in Germany for the last four decades. This is a fundamental difference from the situation in the former slave society of the United States, where Black people have had the same civil rights as white Americans for 150 years, yet continue to be structurally and comprehensively disenfranchised because they are black. In Germany, the disenfranchisement manifests itself as legal denial of civil rights, which affects all so-called foreigners, today especially refugees and (of these) especially those from Africa.

The constant reference of the German critical whiteness community to activists from the US—e.g., [Audre Lorde's stay in Berlin](#) in 1984, as a result of which she aptly criticized her German sisters for their idea of a universal sisterhood, or the writings of Toni Morrison or bell hooks—as well as the self-assignment in narratives of the diaspora, makes invisible that in the early 1970s it was mainly the guest and contract workers who struggled and bled, both in the factories and outside. The migrant struggles in West Germany of the 1970s and 1980s already articulated the same critique that early Black feminists in the US, from Sojourner Truth to Angela Davis, articulated to their white counterparts: the racist divide

must be recognized and overcome! In contrast to the American poets, however, the immigrant proletarian women and men were widely ignored by the German bourgeois women's movement, by the left in general, and by the supporters of CW.

The current focus on the historical context of the U.S. of the late 1970s and 1980s by local proponents of critical whiteness is a misimportation that stems from a class-blind discourse-theoretical preoccupation with white domination in the Americas and thus fails to take into account the history of Kanak struggles in post-Nazi Germany. The resulting hierarchical splitting of racism and "migrantism," BPoCs and migrants, the reference to the Combahee River Collective of 1974 while simultaneously ignoring the [1973 strike of migrant women workers in Pierburg/Neuss](#), is academically elitist and effectively magnifies the lines of social division.

The reference to racially stratified people beyond the black/white dichotomy that the original term PoC sought to capture had been a necessary critique and an effective extension of anti-racist struggles in the US. In Germany, on the other hand, it means a narrowing that invisibilizes and excludes the struggles of the migrant subaltern. It effects the return of the racialized phenotype that evokes a division between "black heads," as the southern European guest workers were contemptuously called due to their hair color, and "black skin." Even though it is repeatedly asserted that a PoC is anyone who is affected by racism, the concrete exclusion mechanisms within this scene show that it is about a strict hierarchization within communities affected by racism.

Elahe Haschemi Yekani et al. [remind us](#) in their critical discussion of the German reception of Black feminist theory from the U.S. that intersectionality actually started out with the goal of clarifying identity categories instead of fixing them and playing them off against each other. Most clearly, the dangerous hierarchization and elitist ignorance of German provenance toward racially discriminated migrants is reflected in the silence of critical whiteness groups on the extensive series of nine racially motivated murders and multiple attacks against the sons and daughters of the guest worker generation by the [Nazi cell NSU](#) during the 2000s. In the logic of Critical Whiteness, according to which German anti-racists are defined as white and therefore just as racist as Nazis, it is seemingly logical to act loudly and destructively against anti-racist plenums, but to pass over racist murders in silence.

Language, Privilege, and Awareness

In Critical Whiteness, while domination appears structural, it nonetheless operates primarily as an individual act of communication. The discourse-theoretical reductionism of the idea that "white spaces" and concrete relations of dominance could be changed through institutionalized naming practices and

individual unlearning, hides the social mechanisms of racism, especially the fact that racism has a structuring function for exploitation. This function is rendered invisible with the emphasis on individual codes of behavior. What remains is a neoliberal inwardness that can be observed everywhere, which no longer wants to know anything about social change, but only speaks of exclusion, because it can no longer think of the individual as socially stratified, but only positioned as an individual. The penetrating question "Where am I racist, where am I white, where am I overlooked, where am I privileged, where am I traumatized, how do I talk, how am I talked to, how do I move, how do I affect someone else, how do I feel about the other?" entails a permanent self-reflection and self-optimization that is no longer able to think the universal out of the particular.

Racism is, however, not so much an internalized wrong thinking or an innate characteristic that has to be held in check by a language police as much as it is a practice that has the structuring function of distributing people in social space and fixing them in specific positions. That is, racism is not an identitarian project, even if it produces identities, but a way to distribute rights and wealth unjustly. It is not so much affiliations and corresponding privileges as the unequal rights that lead to these relationships. Moreover, privileges—e.g., the right to vote—are often bitterly-fought-for rights that should actually apply to everyone. At its best, an anti-racist perspective therefore has in mind the struggle for rights for all, rather than the enforcement of repression for all, as seen in the authoritarian "awareness" policies of critical whiteness. The discouragement or "discomfort" of the majority society does not lead to empowerment of the marginalized. Rather, what is needed is a political intervention that does not envy the privileged their privilege but appropriates it by creating alliances of solidarity. Instead of a retreat into homogeneous groups within a safe space, combined with the wish that an ever-present watchdog team banish any pain to the outside, there could be an orientation toward the other (in us), which measures and establishes the common(s) in shared social spaces. This would be the exact opposite of an awareness concept in which regression and powerlessness are constitutively (self-)inscribed. Paradoxically, as Daniele Grigioli stated, this [self-positioning as powerless](#) leads, politically, to marginalized groups struggling primarily to be recognized as oppressed and thus affirming rather than challenging the social hierarchy.

Debts from the Past and Shifting to the Future

This text argues for a migrant perspective that has an interest in both practical intervention and theoretical reflection, and in which the struggle for social rights, rather than post-political camp formation, is about a different future. The history of migration and Black Liberation shows that racism could always be overcome by people transcendentally anticipating conditions that did not yet exist. These movements always spoke to us from the future. Transcending one's own imposed identity boundaries as well as the boundaries of the other are

constitutive elements of this: it is necessary to tread a terrain that is still non-existent but can be produced in these moments. People are never identical in their identities, and it is precisely out of these contradictions that they become capable of emancipation. It is not (always only) about the perfidious concealment of power relations, but about changing these relations, about creating heterotopic places where normative attributions lose their validity—even if only temporarily. We need these places, because there we gain a future image of something worth fighting for. That such places cannot and must not exist, in the opinion of many critical whiteness activists—that, on the contrary, spaces must be permanently controlled by a self-proclaimed avant-garde—is dystopian, sad, hopeless, and above all threatening, because it means the abandonment of struggles for universal liberation, in favour of the repressive promise of harmony in one's own particular entity.

We can only free associate through a desire for liberation and a good life, respectively a “[vivir sabroso](#),” as stated recently by Colombia’s black vice president Francia Márquez, and not through fear of each other. This means that encounter, communication, and common action must open the space for change instead of aligning and hermetically sealing it to the supposed or real security needs of injured or traumatized people in anticipation of possible violations. This is not easy, nor is it a plea for harshness or ignorance of the real experiences of everyday structural oppression. Instead, it is a proposal to transcend them—which offers the only possibility of overcoming racist divisions in society. This “we” should appear neither given nor voluntaristic. Lines of demarcation have their justification and are often important, even sometimes essential for survival. This “we” can only be formed in concrete struggles; it is not an identitarian we, but one formed through acts of solidarity. What is missing is a notion of alliances of solidarity based on mutual critique and shared experience. This is a politics and an attitude oriented toward a better life in the future, and hence the opposite of a political morality secured on debts from the past. This struggle is a shift toward a future that potentially includes everyone—even the sad white figures with their nice privileges.

*This text is a revised and updated version of the German book article *Triggerwarnung*. Massimo Perinelli: “Triggerwarnung! Critical Whiteness und das Ende antirassistischer Bewegung,” in: Eva Berendsen, Saba-Nur Cheema, Meron Mendel (eds.): *Trigger Warnung. Identitätspolitik zwischen Abwehr, Abschottung und Allianzen*. Berlin 2019, pp. 77-90.*

BETWEEN MARGINALIZATION AND INSTRUMENTALIZATION: ANTI- EASTERN EUROPEAN AND ANTI-SLAVIC RACISM

by Hans-Christian Petersen

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Germany has a long history of colonialism and racism in Eastern Europe. To this day, people who are perceived as “Eastern” face discrimination and exclusion. In research and in current anti-racist debates, however, their experiences largely represent a blind spot. At the same time, the topic is instrumentalized by the Russian state—and the networks and influencers supporting it—as “Russophobia.” To avoid leaving the topic open to ideological instrumentalization, it is vital to talk about anti-Eastern European and anti-Slavic racism.

In Western thought since the Enlightenment, “Eastern Europe” has been seen as the “other” in the sense of “Europe but not Europe” ([Larry Wolff](#)). The term has denoted a world between Occident and Orient that is characterized by backwardness and barbarism. [Maria Todorova](#) has outlined similar findings regarding Southeastern Europe, or “the Balkans.” Such a perspective can be described as colonial and as anti-Eastern European racism, defined as a set of pejorative, essentialist ascriptions to the geographical space of Eastern Europe and its inhabitants. This is particularly evident in Germany because of its long history of interdependence with and expansion into Eastern Europe.

A hierarchizing view on “the East” was a constant of German discourse in the “long” nineteenth century. A prominent example is the deeply colonial discourse in the debates in the [Frankfurt Paulskirche in 1848/49](#): Starting from the question of the position of Posen and Bohemia in a future German Empire, a large, cross-factional majority debated a much more far-reaching “German East” reaching to the Black Sea, which was to be conquered and dominated in a *mission civilisatrice*. Another example is [Gustav Freytag's influential novel “Soll und Haben” \(1855\)](#), which featured on the bookshelves of almost every upper-bourgeois household for decades and anchored both anti-Semitic images and the indelible stereotype of incompetent Poles in the collective consciousness.

The German Empire brought about a radicalization and racialization of [the German view on “the East.”](#) In the pseudo-scientific racist discourse that developed from the second half of the nineteenth century, the “Slavs” in particular were constructed as a separate “race” whose “whiteness” was not in question, but who were nevertheless inferior. Racism against people from Eastern Europe is therefore often referred to [as anti-Slavic racism or anti-Slavism](#). This anti-Slavism had practical consequences: The German Empire established [group-based discriminatory policies](#) regarding residency opportunities and naturalization options for immigrants from Eastern Europe, thereby allowing anti-Slavic and anti-(Eastern) Jewish resentments to mix and reinforce each other. The German Empire's settlement policy in the [Polish partition territories of Prussia](#) (“Ostmark”) belongs to this continuity, as does the “Land Ober Ost” of World War I and the “Grenzkolonialismus” (border colonialism) and “Grenzlandarbeit” (borderland work) that were propagated in the Weimar period. Furthermore, the emergence of “[Ostforschung](#),” which provided scientific expertise for colonization plans (“[Deutscher Osten](#)”), has significant importance in this context. The rise of anti-Slavism occurred concurrently with other forms of discrimination against inhabitants of the greater region, such as anti-Semitism (“Eastern Jews and Jewish Bolshevism,” portrayed as enemies) and antiziganism. This historical as well as contemporary intersectionality of anti-Slavism has hardly been researched so far, although it is increasingly being addressed by representatives of the young post-East (PostOst) generation in Germany ([Prokopkin 2022](#); [Tikhomirova 2022](#); [quarteera 2022](#)).

The Nazi regime's “Generalplan Ost” and its extremely brutal rule in the occupied territories of Eastern Europe represented the culmination of such racist hierarchizations and expansionist projects. Along with the Jewish population, which was murdered in the Shoah, the Slavic population was assigned the role of racially inferior enslaved people (“slawische Untermenschen”— “Slavic subhumans”). [The large number of victims](#) among the civilian population in the Soviet Union, Poland, and South-Eastern Europe can be understood only in light of this racist background. One need only recall the [blockade of Leningrad](#), which still receives little attention in Germany: Over a million people starved and froze to death in the city because, in the view of the Germans, they were “superfluous eaters” who were to make way for “Germanization.” Another example is the treatment of the millions of so-called “Eastern workers” (“[Ostarbeiter](#)”) who performed forced labor in the German Reich under inhumane conditions. Their separate marking with the patch “Ost” and the prohibition against them having sexual relations with the “Aryan” population can only be described as racist.

So far, the story is relatively well known. However, its relevance to the period after 1945 is rarely discussed. We have known for a long time that there was no “zero hour”—and this is no less true of anti-Slavic and anti-Eastern European racism. In the Cold War period and beyond, anti-communism directed at Eastern Europe, swear words, and jokes about Eastern European immigrants (which experienced a renewed boom, especially after 1989) represent continuities. In the post-socialist period, [large numbers of ethnic German repatriates \(Spätaussiedler\) and contingent refugees](#) came to Germany as “special” migrant groups whose membership was negotiated against the background of their “Eastern” origins.

Like so many people perceived as “Eastern,” they experienced professional de-skilling and found—and still find—themselves far down the German work hierarchy, employed in warehouse logistics, in [care work](#) or as cleaners. [They experienced discrimination because of their accents, their surnames, or because the food they ate at home was different](#). They share these experiences of devaluation with other migrant groups and people in the Federal Republic, such that it would be only logical and appropriate to think about and recognize them together. The 2019 micro-census estimates that around 10 million people in the Federal Republic have a migration background from Eastern Europe, including the states that have acceded to the EU since 2004, the former Soviet Union, and the former Yugoslavia. Thus, one-eighth of the total population of Germany—and nearly half of Germany’s 21.2 million residents with a migration background—come from Eastern Europe. Identifying the discrimination against these people is fundamental to make all forms of racism visible in German society.

Marginalization of “the East” and the Question of “Whiteness”

Despite the great historical and contemporary importance of the topic, it received only limited attention both in research and in public debate. In part, this is due to the public’s generally limited knowledge about Eastern Europe in general: the “[Global East](#)” has, since at least the end of the Cold War, held the status of a “[semi-periphery](#),” leading to its “[dual exclusion](#),” since it is regarded as “not-quite-North” and at the same time “not-quite-South.” This marginalization of “the East” is reinforced by the fact that people in or from Eastern Europe have not been able to find their place in the current discourse on racism and postcolonialism, with the consequence that their experiences go almost unnoticed. If we understand critical whiteness as “a system of power relationships” based on “[marked racialised identities](#),” then Eastern Europeans are still generally regarded as “[white but not quite](#),” as “[off-white blacks](#).” This is especially true for the (late) repatriates who are “privileged” in the German migration regime, as they were granted German citizenship and were able to take advantage of various support measures. However, as described, this did not protect them

from falling victim to racist hostility and violence. How does their position as “[internal others](#)” impact their (non)positioning in debates around (post)colonialism and (anti)racism? Moreover, what does this imply for future inclusive conceptualizations of racism? So far, the transnational reception of contemporary theories on racism and Critical Whiteness leaves blind spots in the group-based discourses that underlie German history and present-day life. They pose the risk of excluding people who do not fall into the “black” and “white” dichotomy but who nonetheless suffer racial discrimination. Eastern Europeans’ experiences in Germany are an illustrative example of this. They are not racially discriminated because they are “white,” but because other racist hierarchizations affect “white” people. Racism it is, nonetheless.

In addition, there is often a lack of awareness of ambiguity. People in and from Eastern Europe can be racist and still suffer it themselves. It is precisely the dynamic between suffering and practicing racist discrimination in hierarchically organized, diverse societies that needs to be understood: [The path to acceptance in the dominant society may lead through one's own racist practice](#). The anti-racist and postcolonial debate, on the other hand, is often dominated by a rigid perpetrator-victim dichotomy. People and societies can, however, be both at the same time. A current example of this is Russia—which brings us to the question of developments since February 24, 2022.

Hostility and Instrumentalization

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and was extended on February 24, 2022, has brought increased attention to the issue of racism against people from Eastern Europe. Domestically, since the war began, there has been an accumulation of incidents in which Russian-speakers in Germany have collectively been blamed for the war in Ukraine. These acts have ranged from online calls for boycotts of actual or perceived Russian restaurants and stores, to insults, to an alleged [arson attack on the Lomonosov School in Berlin on March 11, 2022](#) (though it remains unclear who was behind the act). Such actions must be clearly condemned, as they are used to attack and blame large groups of people—most of whom have lived in Germany for years or decades and who are not responsible for Russia's criminal war. Moreover, many of the people attacked are not from Russia in the first place: the [around 3.5 million post-Soviet migrants in Germany](#) come from diverse countries of the former Soviet Union and are usually multilingual. Their lingua franca is Russian, but its use says nothing about whether someone sees him- or herself as “Russian” or even as a supporter of Putin. These attacks therefore show that racism is based on external attributions that do not necessarily correspond to the self-image of the people concerned. This is particularly bitter for those people who come

from Ukraine and are currently fearing for the lives of their relatives and friends there, yet are addressed and attacked as “Russian.”

For their part, the Russian state and pro-Putin networks and influencers have engaged in targeted instrumentalization of these cases. Both the [nationalist pro-Putin car parades](#) in several German cities and the [homepage of the Russian embassy in Germany](#) foster the impression that all Russian-speaking people in Germany are being discriminated against. The catchword for this is “Russophobia,” the implication being that enmity against everything Russian is determining the actions of “the West.” Both [President Putin](#) and [Foreign Minister Lavrov](#) have repeatedly made this accusation—even before the attack on Ukraine, but especially afterwards—in order to delegitimize the sanctions against Russia and the military support for Ukraine. These views are likewise propagated by influential influencers such as Alina Lipp, who has more than 180,000 followers on her Telegram channel “News from Russia” (Neues aus Russland). In mid-March, she shared a video there about the [alleged murder of a 16-year-old Russian-German who had been beaten to death by a “mob of Ukrainian refugees” in Euskirchen](#). The case very quickly proved to be Russian fake news, but went viral in a very short time regardless. It is a prominent example of the online activities of pro-Russian activists and the instrumentalization of the issue of racism. The buzzword “Russophobia” is used in an attempt to silence voices critical of Russia's war in Ukraine and to divide Western European societies.

[Another way in which Germany's colonial history in Eastern Europe is still apparent is the strikingly low level of knowledge about Ukraine](#). It is a specifically German tradition to look only at Russia when looking “towards the East,” as if the entire imperial and Soviet history was a purely Russian one. There is a clear lack of recognition of the autonomy of the countries “in between” and respect for the interests of their inhabitants. Both Ukraine and Belarus long represented [terra incognita in the German debate](#): nothing was known about these two countries and they were condescendingly seen as supposed Russian zones of influence. Russia's war of aggression has, at least temporarily, led to a change in this image. Solidarity with refugees from Ukraine is great and hundreds of thousands demonstrated in support of Ukraine in the first weeks of the war (albeit with sometimes clearly divergent demands). It remains to be seen whether this change will survive the shock effect of war or whether, in view of the worsening economic and energy situation, compromise with Moscow at the expense of a country “in between” will soon be the order of the day again.

Eastern Europe Matters

Anti-Eastern European and anti-Slavic racism is historically, as well as currently, of central importance. The current attempts to instrumentalize it do not speak against its thematization, but rather for an increased need for science-based information in order to avoid ceding the field to propaganda and fake news. This also requires an opening of the anti-racist and postcolonial debate: A historically adequate and non-exclusionary approach to the topic of “racism” would have to overcome essentialisms and dichotomies and establish a consensus that it should not be about memory or victim competition. Different racist categories and practices, with their specific characteristics, must be analyzed. Racism against people from Eastern Europe, in particular, must be taken very seriously—it is a “racism against whites” that affects people not because they are “white”, but because other racist hierarchizations affect outwardly “white” people. Looking at the after-effects of the colonial heritage in Eastern Europe, an [“eastward expansion of memory”](#)—and thus also of the racism debate—is overdue and urgently needed.

STILL AN EAST-WEST DIVIDE? THE DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF EASTERN EUROPEAN MIGRANTS DURING COVID-19

by Magdalena Ulceluse and Felix Bender

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The European Union likes to present itself as an inclusive entity that strives to reduce socio-economic disparities between member states while preserving and celebrating their cultural differences. It is a Union that professes to be [based](#) on principles of inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and non-discrimination. In fact, to read the new [Social Rights Action Plan](#) is to believe that Europe is “home to the most equal societies in the world,” a “unique social and economic model” bound to bring about “shared prosperity.”

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, revealed that this vision is nothing but an aspiration. It brought to the fore the underlying unequal power dynamics within the EU and the way that citizenship continues to be unequally valued. The old fault lines became particularly glaring in the way Eastern European¹ migrant workers were [mistreated](#) in the fields, greenhouses, and slaughterhouses of Western European member states. It became clear that there is a stark difference between western-EU and eastern-EU citizenship, between what passports determine and what they allow in the treatment of their holders. Any debates over tackling the emerging [culture wars](#) within the European Union should keep in mind this imbalance of power between East and West and how it informs and shapes the actions of both sides.

¹ Although the boundaries and identities of Western, Southern, Nordic, Eastern, and Central Europe have fluctuated over time, changing positions and meanings in the political, geographic, cultural, and symbolic cartography of Europe over the past century (see Lee and Bideleux 2014), here we employ the dichotomous labels of East and West, as they more accurately reflect the new fault line within the EU that our article argues has become visible during the pandemic. The countries included in our definition of Eastern Europe are all current EU member states that were formerly ruled by Communist regimes (not including the former East Germany, since it is no longer a separate entity from the rest of Germany): Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

The European Union's East-West Divide

The differential treatment of Eastern European workers during the pandemic reflects the unequal power relations between Eastern and Western member states and the internal political, economic, and social hierarchy within the European Union. This internal hierarchy manifests itself in the divide between a set of dominant, core Western member states who set the European agenda, drive the process, and generally get their way, on the one hand, and the subordinate, [peripheral](#), Eastern member states, on the other hand. Norms and habits of solidarity are stronger among these core members, especially among the original founding [six](#),² who have over time developed and consolidated common interests, discourses, and geostrategic positions and who share similar levels of economic development.

From 1945 to 1989, the Iron Curtain separated East and West not only physically, due to restricted movement, but also [ideologically](#). Under the Communist regimes, Eastern Europe was seen as embodying the opposite of what Western Europe symbolized, as it had a different set of values, laws, economic arrangements, educational institutions, ideology, and culture. In the post-Cold War world, becoming an EU member state represented the opportunity to join an exclusive club that promised, among other things, economic development and political legitimacy. The 2004 and 2007 Eastern European EU enlargements, however, only [reinforced](#) the existing internal hierarchies, with considerable implications for perceptions of power relations, influence, and leverage between the older and newer member states. To this day, Eastern European countries are generally not involved in the “[knowledge culture](#)” of Brussels and have little political clout, as Western states turn mostly to each other for policy input and rarely reach out to Eastern Europe. In fact, despite their professed mission of further solidarity with Eastern member states, Western member states periodically contemplate a “multi-speed Europe” in which “moving in the same direction” may also be achieved by acting “together, at different paces and intensity where necessary,” [statements](#) that reinforce the second-tier status of Eastern Europe.

Freedom of Movement within the EU: Bridging the Gap?

Freedom of movement within the EU was supposed to be a key element of the process of ending this East-West divide within the Union. It was expected that freedom of movement would contribute to economic convergence by optimally allocating resources and factors of production

² That is: Belgium, France, Germany (at the time West Germany), Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

across member states, and to social cohesion through exposure to and experience with different cultures and peoples. Through freedom of movement, Europeans' understandings of [community](#), membership, and democracy were to be reconfigured; the lives of EU citizens from other countries and their claims to equal treatment, equal opportunity, and fair play were to become a part of their realities. The idea was to bring European citizens closer together, foster understanding amongst them, reduce differences, and combat stereotypes for an ever-closer union. The Erasmus and Leonardo da Vinci exchange programs, for instance, were created with this purpose in mind.

And yet, in one of the clearest reflections of the EU's internal hierarchies and uneven distribution of power, following the enlargements, Eastern European migrant workers did not immediately receive the same rights and access as their Western European counterparts. Rather, the pre-existing member states decided to implement transitional arrangements, a series of labor market measures put in place to restrain the potential inflow of migrant workers from the new member states. During the transitional arrangements period, Eastern European migrant workers had the right to travel and settle in the older member states, but generally experienced limited access to their labor markets. This access was restricted through various national measures, including complex application procedures, proof of suitability, work permit requirements, and quotas. In most older member states, the arrangements remained in effect until 2011 and 2014 for those states that had joined in 2004 and 2007, respectively, during which time the older members greatly shaped the economic opportunities of Eastern European migrant workers in Western Europe.

This discrimination represented the basis for, and legitimized the unequal treatment of, Eastern European migrant workers in Western member states. Their status as [second-class](#) EU citizens transformed them into a group of precarious migrant workers, temporarily admitted into the lowest sectors of the labor market yet excluded from the workplace benefits and rights that usually come with stable work contracts and residency. Instances of such fraudulent practices as underpayment, excessive work hours, poor accommodation conditions, and/or overcharges for accommodation have been well [documented](#). Such practices provide no opportunities for upward mobility, meaning that many Eastern European workers remain [dependent](#) on low-paid, temporary, and flexible jobs in the secondary labor market.

Furthermore, this second-class status impeded migrant workers' access to the symbolic category of being seen as [full Europeans](#), with the corresponding socio-economic standing. As a result, cultural distinctions and racialized subordinations became common experiences among Eastern

European migrant workers in the West, who faced high rates of downward mobility and prejudice. Differential treatment along the fault line of the old East-West divide fostered an understanding that people from the East needed to be kept at bay and were less worthy of rights. The picture that was painted for the people in Western European states was not one of the accession of equal European nations to the common project of the European Union, but one of Eastern European states as fundamentally backward. The image that was imprinted on the minds of many Western Europeans was thus one of economic, social, and cultural subordination of East to West.

In effect, rather than managing to spread “the peace, stability and prosperity enjoyed in the west to the east and ‘[reunify](#)’ the continent,” the EU created two-tier European citizenship, with Eastern EU citizens being considered less-than with respect to their Western counterparts. Nowhere has this two-tier European citizenship distinction been more visible than in the treatment of Eastern European migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eastern European Migrants during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In a crisis characterized by great uncertainty, as the COVID-19 pandemic certainly was, member states failed to remember calls for solidarity and a united European Union, instead reverting to old asymmetries of interdependence and [bargaining](#) power. These power asymmetries manifested themselves, among other ways, in the [pressuring](#) of Eastern European governments to open their borders and send migrant workers toward the West, in uneven entry restrictions, and in the mistreatment of Eastern European workers, their status as fellow EU citizens notwithstanding.

Many Western member states used the pretext of the pandemic to blatantly disregard the rights and needs of Eastern European citizens and to selfishly look after their own interests. The readiness to protect human lives at nearly any economic cost did not extend to all citizens equally. While Western European states mandated social-distancing rules, remote work, and mask requirements, they were ready to give up on such precautions when it came to migrants from Eastern Europe. In a fluid situation with no vaccinations yet available, there was a willingness to subject migrants to immediate danger for the sake of keeping the agricultural sector alive and [asparagus](#) on German dinner plates.

For instance, in Romania, prospective migrant workers were transported to Western Europe in [cramped](#) airplanes, with no possibility of social distancing. From Germany to the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Italy, and

the UK, the lack of work- or housing-related protective measures for Eastern European migrant workers (such as the provision of masks, gloves or hand sanitizer; proper time off during working hours; and social-distancing measures) has been well documented. For instance, migrant workers were shoved 14 to 15 at a time into [eight-seat](#) vans and transported to the fields, or crammed together in small lunchrooms in their dozens. Furthermore, when borders closed and many Eastern Europeans became unable to return home, they were often forced to stay with their employers, who also provided housing, rendering them vulnerable to abuses. In order to keep their jobs and, thus, their accommodations, migrant workers had to put in longer working hours with less pay, no sick days, and/or unsanitary working conditions. Moreover, Eastern European migrant workers were completely cut off from the surrounding local communities during the pandemic. They did not work side by side with locals, they were often housed in shared accommodations [located](#) far outside residential areas, and they were transported to and from work using separate means of transportation. Segregation, far from leading to a political outcry, was politically willed.

In effect, Western European countries were willing to ignore the potential danger of a COVID-19 outbreak as long as this danger existed only within migrant communities. As soon as outbreaks started to feel too “[close to home](#),” and under pressure from the [media](#) and trade unions, some governments mobilized and put together Commissions to investigate and act on the numerous allegations of improper working and living conditions. In practice, however, enforcement of labor legislation was limited. In the [Netherlands](#), for instance, the fines for infringements were so low as to have no deterrent effect and inspectors operated via phone due to COVID-19 restrictions on physical inspections. In [Germany](#), meanwhile, the government itself prevented trade unions and advisory centers from reaching out to workers, making it difficult to properly assist them and to monitor the dire conditions they were facing. To be sure, insufficient monitoring of labor conditions and poor enforcement of labor legislation in sectors dominated by Eastern European migrants is not specific to the pandemic period. It was, however, amplified during the pandemic, when the question of who to protect and where to accept risks heavily disadvantaged this particular group of EU citizens.

Last but not least, Eastern European migrant workers were largely [excluded](#) from receiving social assistance or benefits such as unemployment, sickness, disability, or survivor’s pension, as well as from being included in national COVID-19-related support programs. The pandemic highlighted how Eastern Europeans workers’ [unequal](#) access to social rights is a direct consequence of their unequal access to and poor conditions in the labor

market. Because of the migrant workers' contractual arrangements and the absence of labor unions in many of the sectors in which they worked (and even when these were present, the lack of representation for Eastern Europeans and migrant workers more generally), many fell through the cracks in terms of social support when the pandemic hit. Importantly, this unequal access to social rights within the EU has a strong "East-West geographical [dimension](#)" reinforced by the racialization of Eastern European migrants and their limited access to the labor market following the 2004 and 2007 enlargements (see Ulceluse and Bender [2022](#)).

Like other critical junctures before it, including the eurozone crisis and the migration crises of the past decade, the COVID-19 pandemic provided EU member states with ample opportunities to implement measures that in normal circumstances would have been difficult to justify. Yet in a time that required solidarity and unity of purpose, member states turned inward, largely choosing [nationalistic](#) paths. They [unilaterally](#) closed their [borders](#), hoarded or stopped the export of critical medical supplies, and played blame games. What is more, during the pandemic, intra-EU mobility and the treatment of fellow EU citizens reflected a hierarchy of rights, a hierarchy of importance in which the needs of citizens from Western Europe were deemed more important than the safeguarding of citizens from Eastern Europe.

What does this mean for the future of the EU? The fact that two of its core tenets—the freedom of movement and the equal treatment of EU citizens—were so easily disregarded and infringed upon might have long-lasting impact, potentially undermining the hard-won socio-economic integration of its member states. Yet there is nothing inevitable about this. A new critical juncture, the war in Ukraine, has shown that member states can indeed band together and act as one. Where there is a will, there seems to be a way, so there is still hope that the social, economic, and political division between East and West can be mended in time. The European Union can live up to its name if it chooses to do so.

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DUAL ATTACK ON SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE DELEGITIMIZATION OF “WOKE”/”WOKISM”

by Angéla Kóczé

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The conference on the Future of Europe (spring 2021 – spring 2022) launched by the European Union was a bottom-up participatory consultation. It was a one-year series of discussions, debates, and collaborations between citizens, politicians, and policymakers on the future of Europe. On the conference website, there are several proposals submitted by citizens and institutions. The Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) Centre for European Studies, a [scientific bastion of the Hungarian illiberal state](#),¹ [submitted the following proposal](#), tweeted broadly under the banner of [#WokeFreeEurope](#):

The EU must be a safe space free of cancel culture. The rampant and noxious “woke culture” must be eradicated, woke terminology (such as intersectionality, unconscious bias, gender assigned at birth) shall be banned, especially in official documents. The Commission must remain neutral, instead of promoting “top-down” minoritarian ideologies, and imposing solutions in areas it has no competency(s). Wokism is at odds with the European way of life, its history and its culture, there must be no place for wokism in Europe! [#WokeFreeEurope](#) (Mathias Corvinus Collegium Centre for European Studies)

The MCC’s proposal is an effort to delegitimize woke/wokism without deliberation and open reference. The term “woke culture” is used as coded language to ridicule social justice. We live in a time of confusion, disenchantment, and—most importantly—serious global social, political, and economic turbulence that raises not just existential insecurities, but also theoretical ambiguities. This short essay is a preliminary contemplation of

¹ [Andrea Pető \(2022\)](#) accurately elaborates the history of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) and critiques its embeddedness in the Hungarian illiberal scientific institutional landscape.

what is considered woke/wokism, the conceptualization of anti-woke culture, and the effects of its mobilization in mainstream political and media discourse. How can we explain and respond to the political strategies and tactics used in the anti-woke campaign to distort social justice struggles, normalize human rights violations, repress human rights activists, and misrepresent the original conceptualization of “woke”/“wokism,” a movement that has liberatory and emancipatory potential to reckon with historical injustices and provide justice for people who have historically been oppressed, racialized, and excluded from material and symbolic wealth?

The Genealogy of Woke: A Call for Awareness of Racism

The term “woke” originated from black vernacular and is inherently tied to black consciousness and anti-racist struggles. It was first referenced in popular culture during a spoken word section at the end of a recording of the 1938 protest folk song “Scottsboro Boys” by Lead Belly. The song refers to the horrific 1931 court case of nine black youths who were falsely accused of raping two white women and whose lives were destroyed by the deeply racist Alabama justice system (Cose, 2020). At the end of the recording, speaking to folklorist Alan Lomax, Louisiana blues and folk singer Lead Belly can be heard saying, “I advise everybody, be a little careful when they go along through there—best *stay woke*, keep their eyes open.”² In 2014, following the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, “stay woke” became a motto/slogan used for protest and political mobilization against police brutality and racial violence. Widely promoted by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, #StayWoke on social media is a call for being aware of racism, structural violence, and systemic racism (Romano 2020).

Dual Assault on Social Justice

When reading and digesting the arguments against BLM and other so-called “woke” movements—that is, movements for social, racial, and gender justice that use the same conceptual language—it helps to understand the subtle and insidious link between far-rightists, on the one hand, and liberals and leftists, on the other hand.

² This video features Lead Belly's "Scottsboro Boys" from the 2015 box set "Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection." For more information about this album, see <http://www.folkways.si.edu/leadbelly>. The recording is also available on YouTube: "Lead Belly – 'Scottsboro Boys,'" YouTube video, 4:40, posted by "SmithsonianFolkwaysRecordings," July 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrXfkPVIFIE&t=272s>, accessed October 25, 2022.

The terms “woke” and “wokism” originated from a specific historical event and have been deployed by Black Lives Matter to articulate systemic racism. However, it has become prevalent to label U.S. college campus activism as “wokism,” thereby appropriating the term to describe students’ protest efforts to silence conservative/right-wing speakers ([Boyers 2019](#)). However, being conservative or right-wing in an academic context does not necessarily mean that someone should be silenced.

The concept of “woke/wokism” has reached Europe, particularly the UK, where it has been used by conservative parties, right-wing media outlets, and even the broader public ([Cammaerts 2022](#)). It has also recently emerged in semi-peripheral countries such as Hungary. “Woke” and “wokism” are used by conservative illiberal and far-right leaders and pundits to depict a [threat to the existing European cultural and social order](#) posed by an [ideologically indoctrinated religious establishment](#). Such leaders push the buttons of liberals and leftists by claiming that they endorse dangerous [identity politics](#); they also decry those who stand up for human rights as being swayed by fashionable [whims](#).

There are common threads in these conservative discourses, namely attacking and mocking individuals, groups, institutions, and specific studies that critique gendered and racialized discrimination and structural oppression. Thus, they trap liberals and leftists into delegitimizing and unrecognizing human rights activists’ claims regarding historical and structural injustice. Trapped liberals and leftists either remain silent and indifferent or use the same subtle language, albeit with different emphases, against those who are labelled as “woke” groups, institutions, and studies under the conceptual framework of “illiberalism.”

However, the constructive critiques of and discontent with liberalism articulated by racialized and gendered minorities are neither anti-liberalism nor illiberalism. In the same vein, constructive critique of certain trends in social justice activism is not anti-social-justice or opposing social justice; rather, it is a longstanding unresolved and antagonized dialogue—or, more typically, no more than a lonely monologue. Also, the discontent with the left captured via “identity politics” usually masks class-based, exploitative, and oppressive practices. Nevertheless, the concept of “intersectionality”—as a systemic account of gendered, racialized, and class-based oppressions—is deeply contested and critiqued by the left and perceived as an identity-based “new caste system” or “racial and cultural hierarchies” that place non-white, non-heterosexual people on the top ([Coastonjane 2019](#)).

Examining the articulation of “anti-woke” discourse helps uncover the subtle link between far-rightists and trapped liberals and leftists that creates the dual assault on social justice harnessed by conservative illiberal and far-right leaders.

Hegemonization, Demilitarization, and the Flaws of Liberal Democracy

[Bart Cammaerts \(2022\)](#), in his recent article, provides an enlightening theoretical framework for deconstructing the anti-woke cultural war and understanding its logic and long-lasting impact. He deploys the notion of “metapolitics,” used in fascist discourses linked to the Gramscian “hegemonization” and “the war of position,” as well as the friend/enemy distinction theorized by Carl Schmitt and combined with the theories of deviance and moral panics. The foundation of his theory is based on the Italian Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, which is always described as natural, internalized, and devoid of ideology and bias; it is unquestionable common sense that cannot be challenged, discussed, and debated. The conceptual condition of hegemony is central to the process of normalization. According to Cammaerts, the far right have skilfully used and taken advantage of the leftist Gramscian conceptual framework which they have embedded in Schmittian polarization and the friend/enemy distinction.

In this regard, anti-woke discourse always emphasizes the ideological basis of the social justice movement without being vocal about anti-wokists’ own ideological standing, regardless of their political orientation. For instance, the MCC proposal to the EU highlights “[...]The Commission must remain neutral, instead of promoting ‘top-down’ *minoritarian ideologies*...” (emphasis added). Gramsci, as a neo-Marxian, also envisioned that the capitalist and bourgeois power could not be overthrown by a revolutionary agenda through the use of physical violence; rather, this would require a gradual “insidious struggle” or “war of position” ([Gramsci, 1971](#): LXVI, cited in [Cammaerts 2022: 731](#)).

Following this idea, paradoxically, far-right movements have exploited the leftist Gramscian conceptualization and repackaged fascist ideas as normal and acceptable under neoliberal capitalism. Cammaerts argues that Gramsci’s revolutionary ideas are being popularized at the current historical juncture not by the left, but by the far right, who have achieved a new illiberal authoritarian order.

He draws on the concept of “metapolitics” that has been deployed by the far right (Cammaerts 2022:732). Despite the concept’s genealogy—it emerged in the context of German liberal thought—“metapolitics” is still

attributed to Gramsci. For instance, Daniel Friberg, in his book [*The Real Right Returns* \(Friberg 2015\)](#), explains indisputably that “metapolitics” is a concept strategically aligned with the Gramscian “hegemonization” and “war of position” to create a long-term counterhegemonic worldview, thought, and culture (ideology) that transpose theory into action. This subversive counter-hegemonic conceptualization has been appropriated as a political strategy and tactic of the alt-right in the U.S. and in European illiberal conservative and far-right politics, whereas the “left-liberals” have failed to take advantage of these subversive left-wing concepts in the way the far right have.

The far right’s subversion of the Gramscian idea of a “long-term hegemonic struggle” to normalize fascist ideology brings us to the “anti-enlightenment constitutionalist and outspoken” controversial scholar Carl Schmitt ([Cammaerts 2022:732](#)). Schmitt grapples with the friend/enemy distinction, which proves to be a central point of politics at our current political juncture. As [Laclau and Mouffe \(1985\)](#) explain in the preface to the second edition of their book (published in 2000), the Jacobian friend/enemy model of politics, which is based upon the “simple competition among interests taking place in a neutral terrain” ([Laclau and Mouffe 2000:XV](#)) is basically over. They propose a radical rethinking of democracy, encouraging leftists to improve their understanding of the structure of democracy and power relations and even imagine a new democracy. Carl Schmitt’s friend/enemy distinction, without agreeing with his conclusion that liberalism should be discarded, provides a potentially productive framework for understanding the nature of the antagonistic articulation and the discursive production of ideological enemies. As Chantal Mouffe suggests, discussing Schmitt’s work might help improve our understanding of the flaws of liberal democracies ([Mouffe 1999](#)). She advises that “[t]he strategy is definitely not to read Schmitt to attack liberal democracy, but to ask how it could be improved. To think both with and against Schmitt—this is the thrust of our unquestionable common sense endeavour” (Ibid., 6). In this chapter, her contribution to an edited volume published in 1999 by several outstanding thinkers, Mouffe already forecasts the forthcoming sinister hegemonic struggle that leftist liberals have not grasped and have not been ready to pick up. As [Laclau and Mouffe \(1985: 135\)](#) stress in their earlier work, “in order to speak of hegemony, [. . .] it is also necessary that the articulation should take place through a confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices” (cited in [Cammaerts 2022: 732](#)).

Furthermore, Cammaerts powerfully shows how social justice norms have gradually been abnormalized over the last three decades, as previously marginal fascist, authoritarian, extreme-right ideas have “in a relatively short

period of time become a strong, powerful and emboldened segment of the mainstream right with ideas and viewpoints once considered deviant and morally repugnant today confidently asserted as the new common sense and increasingly shaping public policy” ([Cammaerts 2022: 731](#)). This assertion, based on Cammaerts’ analysis of anti-woke discourse in the UK, shows that “social justice abnormalization” has been accomplished through a systemic “re-normalization of racist and fascist ideologies.”

“Abnormalization” and Delegitimization of Social Justice

To understand the consolidation of the anti-woke cultural war, I would add another factor: the delegitimization of and political-intellectual attack on human rights values, institutions, and defenders that has flared up over the past decade, particularly in illiberal authoritarian regimes such as Hungary. The constant attacks and administrative restrictions have contributed significantly to the “abnormalization” of social justice, twisting and subverting the moral norms established by the post-World War II human rights canon, with its commitments to human dignity, freedom, and welfare. Human Rights Watch explains in their 2021 World Report that members of the Hungarian government and ruling party are engaged in an ongoing smear campaign against human rights defenders, whom they frequently describe as “Soros agents” who undermine national security ([Human Rights Watch 2021](#)). Not only do they consign human rights defenders to the group of constructed enemies, but they also “abnormalize” and completely distort the moral valence of their work.

[Gráinne de Búrca’s \(2021\)](#) account resonates with this trend. He succinctly explains the mechanisms of the unfolding political panorama supported by rising far-right political parties and movements to undermine and weaken the normative framework of human rights and democratic institutions. These parties and movements advance repressive policies against human rights defenders and vulnerable populations, such as racialized minorities, LGBTQ people, and others. They capture and control independent institutions and destabilize/eliminate the checks and balances of the legal system, thereby distorting the system of liberal democracy. Regarding the attack on human rights, a cautionary observation is that even constructive critiques of human rights have been appropriated by illiberal authoritarian leaders and far-right supporters. De Búrca summarizes the critique made by prominent scholars, noting that “human rights [stand] accused of being a tool of Western imperialism ([Mutua 2002](#)), an elitist and bureaucratic legal paradigm ([Koskeniemi 2011](#)), a limiting expert discourse which crowds out emancipatory political alternatives ([Kennedy 2002](#)), which limits its ambitions and hides its own ‘governmentality’ ([Brown 2004](#)), an intellectually ‘autistic’ culture ([Koskeniemi 2021](#)), anti-politics ([Marks 2013](#)), and a [powerless] companion to neoliberalism ([Moyn 2015](#))” (de

[Búrca 2021: 2](#)). While these critiques are an important part of liberal democracy and some of them merit reflection, in an illiberal authoritarian regime these critiques are hijacked and used as tools to undermine the legitimacy of human rights.

The “abnormalization” of social justice by illiberal authoritarian leaders and the far right is thus undergirded by these actors’ misuse and distortion of the critiques of the human rights enterprise articulated by both conservative and progressive scholars. I argue that we must be vigilant about our critiques of so-called woke culture (for instance, gender and critical race theory rendered as woke and intellectual illiberalism) because the anti-woke cultural war might instrumentalize and use these well-intended critiques for the benefit of the far right—that is, to erode the human rights and dignity of gendered, racialized, and LGBTQ people.

While right-wing attacks on woke/wokism are open and excessively confrontational, leftist and liberal ones are more subtle, disguised as a critique of identity-based politics or the race-centered approach, which these scholars argue does not offer an adequate explanation for addressing the root causes of inequalities. These critiques usually dismiss or simply neglect the structuring force of gender and the politics of racialization, which contribute to systemic race-, class-, and gender-based structural discrimination.

Neglecting these forces does not mean that they are not present and operational. They are still with us and profoundly influence our life, yet scholars have not made the effort to understand these structuring forces because they are too concerned with the concepts of structural racism and gender discrimination. Silence and negligence by leftists and liberals can reinforce systemic racism and gender discrimination.

Political Fragmentation and Social Alienation

I started this essay by citing a proposal by MCC, within the framework of [#WokeFreeEurope](#) in 2021, in which they delegitimize and harshly invalidate organizations, activists, and scholars who are working in the field of gender and critical race studies or apply this knowledge to their work and activism.

The MCC proposal clearly identifies themes to be “banned” from EU official documents. Given the space limitations of this essay, I focus on the concept of “contested intersectionality” as one of the basic principles of critical race theory and an important theoretical lens of gender studies. While gender studies, scholars, and activists are embraced and protected by left-liberals, critical race theory is still labelled as “intellectual illiberalism” ([Sajó and Uitz 2022: 978](#)), mainly based on its critique of the liberal legal

system—the “rule of law”—which has contributed to the racialization and racial discrimination of various marginalized groups. As noted above, the critique of liberalism is neither illiberal nor anti-liberal *per se*.

Nor is intersectionality illiberal or liberal. Without an extensive and close reading of the genealogy and meaning of the concept, we can read the same recycled, dismissive critiques by right-wing as well as by left-wing scholars and activists (for example, [Sullivan 2017](#); [Csányi and Kováts 2020](#)). In their critiques, there are similarities and differences. However, one of the predominant threads is that intersectionality is primarily concerned with identities and the question of “identity politics.” A student of the legal scholar [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#), who coined the term “intersectionality,” provided the following explanation during an attack on critical race theory: “[Critical race theory] is not really concerned with shallow questions of identity and representation but...is more interested in the deep *structural and systemic questions about discrimination and inequality*” ([Coastonjane 2019](#)) (emphasis added).

Thus, these kinds of irreflexive critiques might seem legitimate and important, but they do not encourage critical political engagement and respect nor reckon with the historical injustice of racialized minorities. Instead, they rather further polarize the political bloc that should articulate a common “new left-wing hegemonic project” in the way it was envisioned by [Laclau and Mouffe \(2000: xviii\)](#). In other words, critiques of intersectionality and other progressive ideas by left-wingers and liberals can be misused by the far right to support their own political agenda, as in the MCC case cited above. This dual assault on woke/social justice ideas and related activists, scholars, and institutions is strategically deployed by conservative media and far-right forces to neutralize progressive social justice movements such as BLM’s critique of structural violence and contestation of racist, sexist, and anti-LGBTQ views ([cf. Cammaerts 2022](#)). Moreover, it enables political fragmentation and social alienation rather than the collaboration and solidarity of those whose work is based on the principles of human rights and social justice. We cannot afford further polarization!

VI.
CURRENT HOT ISSUES:
CLIMATE CHANGE,
COVID-19, BIOETHICAL
QUESTIONS

LÜTZERATH: TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS VERSUS GREEN REALISM

By Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen

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Lützerath will remain.¹ Even if the coal is eventually extracted, the name of the place will continue to be a powerful symbol of the courage and ingenuity of people who resist both a powerful corporation and the power of the state. Lützerath is also a symbol of a policy that fails to recognize the signs of the times: the phasing-out of coal and the transition to a mode of production in which the good life for all, rather than the defense of powerful particular interests, is the central point of reference.

Responsible for the failed policy is the so-called “traffic light” coalition between the Social Democrats (SPD, red), the Liberals (FDP, yellow), and the Greens, which has been governing Germany since the end of 2021. Together with the government of North Rhine-Westphalia, formed by the Christian Democrats and the Greens, they made a deal with the German energy company RWE. The latter would be allowed to destroy Lützerath, situated in the Rhenish brown coalfield, in order to extract the lignite stored underneath the village. In exchange, the company would abandon its plan to destroy five further villages in the region and commit to phasing out coal by 2030, i.e., eight years earlier than envisioned in the so-called “coal compromise” concluded between the German state, the federal states, and the energy companies in 2020.

Until the very last moment, a broad coalition of movements—ranging from Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, the Last Generation, and “Ende Gelände” to a local protest alliance, church groups, the Left party, and the Greens’ youth organization—tried to prevent the destruction of Lützerath. Climate activists squatted in the houses left behind after the original owners were dispossessed and relocated. With enormous creative energy, they constructed a protest infrastructure and trained people in civil disobedience. Many protesters held out in a camp near the village, wintry weather notwithstanding. Finally, on January 14, a rainy and stormy winter

¹ This is a translated and extended version of our article “Lützerath als Fanal. Warum wir transformative Strategien im Kampf gegen die Klimakrise brauchen,” *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 2/2023.

day, around 35,000 people gathered for a large demonstration on the muddy fields around Lützerath that featured an address by Greta Thunberg. On this day, the police violence escalated, leaving many people injured.

The Greens, in particular, must acknowledge the legitimate indignation of the protesters: no sooner did they become a governing party at federal level for the second time since 1998 than they recommenced making policy against the very movements from which they themselves had emerged. The first time, the peace movement led the turn against the Greens after their then-leader Joseph Fischer, the foreign minister of the red-green government, supported German participation in NATO's war in Kosovo. Today, the Greens are disappointing the climate movement, to the strength of which they owe their recent electoral successes.

Green "Sense of Reality"

Certainly, no one expected the Greens' participation in government to bring about a social-ecological revolution. After all, the Greens are part of a coalition in which the anti-environmental FDP has considerable power. Moreover, there is no question that state policy follows a logic different from the actions of social movements. The state is not an instrument that can simply be put at the service of fundamental social change. Rather, the possibilities of state policy are systematically constrained by the prevailing social relations. These relations are, so to speak, inscribed in the state apparatus: they shape the thinking of its personnel and determine which problems can be discussed at all and in what form.

The "march through the institutions" envisaged by the 1968ers resulted in the march of the institutions through the protagonists of the movement. This was the Greens' experience of their first participation in federal government between 1998 and 2005: faster than they would have liked, and mostly without realizing it, the Green leaders internalized the institutional restrictions and misunderstood this as an arrival on the hard ground of reality. In fact, it was only the reality of the ruling class, which they had previously criticized and now wanted to help shape.

The failure of today's leading Greens is that they have not reflected on this experience. Instead, they ran blindly and unprepared into a situation in which they would eventually have to give a quasi-"free pass" to one of the world's biggest polluters as part of a climate policy compromise.

RWE will probably be rubbing its hands with glee at such green realism for some time to come. Even as the climate crisis escalates, the company will be allowed to mine and burn another 280 million tonnes of lignite. In 2030, it will be able to let go of the hot air and scorched earth—and rest assured

that by then, the increased prices for certificates from the European emissions trading scheme will have made coal-fired power generation unprofitable anyway. On top of this, the company gets to destroy an important infrastructure of the climate justice movement, which would have caused it a lot of trouble in the years to come. The squatted Lützerath was a place where people came together for action trainings, workshops and festivals.

Now, it could be argued that the government preceding the current “traffic light” coalition—led by the Christian Democrats with the Social Democrats as a junior partner—systematically slowed down the energy transition and thus created the constraints with which the current government is now confronted. Furthermore, without the Greens in government, the situation would arguably be even worse, since this party pursues the most ecological agenda of the three coalition partners. Finally, one could contend that the current government is not to blame for the rise in gas prices following the Russian attack on Ukraine and the subsequent revival of coal for the purpose of “energy security.”

That is true, but it misses the point. First, the simple fact is that the mining of coal under Lützerath is not necessary to energy security and network stability. This is the conclusion drawn by several expert reports, including those by the [FossilExit Research Group](#) and [Aurora Energy Research](#). Second, it is not necessarily desirable to secure sufficient supply to meet the existing purposes.

Why Social Movements Are Needed

Even if the coal were needed to meet the existing demand for electricity, it would be ecologically obvious to question this demand before emitting even more CO₂ to meet it. Do we need electricity for car factories to produce huge quantities of ever-larger vehicles, which, once released from their factories, either consume huge quantities of electricity or convert the fossil fuels themselves into carbon dioxide? Do we need energy with which for the chemical industry to produce mountains of plastic packaging that is, after a single use, incinerated or exported abroad? This is security of supply for a mode of production and living that is already plunging countless people into existential insecurity.

It would be much more sensible—and, in view of the growing and worsening crises, it is urgent—to pause and ask what things are socially necessary and can be produced in a way that does not further heat up the earth and destroy the livelihoods of people in this country and elsewhere, both now and in the future: a sustainable mobility system, a well-developed health system that is accessible to all, energy-efficient and affordable

housing, and an education system that compensates for differences of origin instead of reproducing them.

Of course, there is plenty of money for this. Society is richer than it has ever been. Those who can afford to spend hundreds of billions of euros on the Bundeswehr (the German federal armed forces) or bailing out the banks also have the resources to make society fit for the future. Why should we continue to waste resources and human creativity on developing new financial instruments, designing SUVs, and optimizing weapons systems? Why not instead put the social effort, the practical and collective intelligence of workers, the creativity of engineers at the service of a good life for all?

Such questions can hardly be discussed in parliaments and ministries. This should come as no surprise, since they go to the heart of the capitalist mode of production: the possibility of using private ownership of the means of production to the detriment of the general public as long as profits, growth, and tax revenues result. This is couched in terms of "competitiveness," with reference to jobs or the argument that "the Chinese" are the problem when it comes to addressing climate change and that Europe has already done its part. But these are smoke bombs that only serve to obscure the real problem.

This is why we need radical social movements like the climate justice movement that has been fighting in Lützerath and elsewhere. They shake up apparent certainties; they make visible concerns that are not, or not sufficiently, represented in the state apparatus; and they reveal apparently natural realities for what they really are: the coagulated results of earlier social conflicts, often in the form of the generalization of powerful particular interests.

Understanding the hard realities that the Greens now take for granted as historical—that is, as shaped by powerful interests—and refusing to accept the logic of constraints means revealing the often-buried possibility of change and making clear that everything could be different. This is what makes radical social movements so dangerous to the ruling class and explains the repression they face. But it is also what makes them so important, because they shift the horizon of what can be thought and said. They open up a space of possibility that is systematically closed to state policy under capitalism alone.

Transformative Strategies

In order to secure what has been achieved and to make successes effective, however, stakes have to be driven in somewhere. Changes need to be

enshrined in law, secured against regression, and designed to withstand foreseeable attacks. This is a difficulty that has led to the failure of many progressive movements. They create a spirit of optimism, point to possible alternatives, shift public debates, and have a politicizing effect on younger generations. But without tangible social changes, such as an end to the burning of fossil fuels, a ban on industrialized meat production or an ambitious dismantling of the car system, there is a risk of frustration.

Another danger is that while movements may initially fight against repression and prevailing opinion, in the medium and long term they risk being co-opted. Repression can strengthen movements by raising awareness of their concerns, notwithstanding the danger to life and limb. By contrast, co-optation often means the creeping end.

Like their economic base, capitalism, liberal democracies thrive on change. They reproduce themselves by constantly reinventing themselves. Social movements are seismographs of a need for action, but this can also be captured politically and not infrequently translated into new business opportunities. The result is what Antonio Gramsci called "passive revolution": the stabilization of existing conditions through their change, steered by the dominant interest groups.

Again, this is not a law of nature, but a tendency inscribed in the functioning of liberal-democratic capitalist societies. The first step is to be aware of it. After that, it is important to deal with this tendency in a critical and reflective way. This applies both to radical social movements and to progressive actors in the state apparatus. Both face the challenge of developing transformative strategies and supporting each other in the process.

In contrast to modernizing-affirmative strategies, transformative strategies are characterized by resisting co-optation and making successes visible. They design concrete reforms in such a way as to make fundamental changes apparent and, ideally, set in motion dynamics that are beyond the control of those in power.

Emancipatory state and party-political actors who are genuinely concerned with far-reaching transformations should be aware of the tension in which they necessarily operate, namely doing politics within and at the same time against the institutions of the capitalist state. Emancipatory politics can move successfully in this contradiction if it also sees itself as an institutional sounding board for social movements. Governments and parties committed to fundamental change must not only represent movements, but also contribute to the empowerment thereof. This is the only way to create

a dynamic that goes beyond the structural limits of the capitalist state and makes it possible to secure the gains for which the movements have fought.

The Greens have failed to do this. They are, as it were, operating on a half-hearted basis: they draw strength (in the form of votes) from the self-empowerment of the climate justice movement, but they give nothing back to the movement, leaving it in the mud of Lützerath to face state repression, which—to complete the symbolism of the struggles—is orchestrated by a Green police chief.

While the movement has emerged at least symbolically victorious so far, the Greens, [as Mona Jaeger speculated](#) in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on January 15, could experience their “Hartz IV moment”—the core of the neoliberal social and labor-market changes in Germany—with the eviction of Lützerath. Just as the SPD squandered years of credibility in social and labor-market policy with its workfare turn and the introduction of the Social Code II in 2005 (of which Hartz IV was a part), the Greens are about to squander the last vestige of credit that the climate justice movement might have granted them. In the firm belief that they are standing on the hard ground of reality, they are making a veritable belly flop on a muddy field in the Rhineland.

What Will Happen in and after Lützerath?

There are many examples that show that transformative politics is possible—and how it can be done. A current example in Germany is “Expropriate *Deutsche Wohnen*” (DWE), a housing movement that initiated a successful referendum to expropriate *Deutsche Wohnen* and other large real estate companies in Berlin. Doing so could contribute to improving the housing conditions of many people. At the same time, it would concretely challenge a structural principle of capitalist society, namely the private disposal of basic infrastructure. The latter, in this case housing, would be removed from the logic of profit and its use value strengthened. A similar approach could be taken with other types of infrastructure. Socialization is also being discussed in the energy sector; in the water sector, formerly privatized companies have been returned to municipalities in many places.

In all these cases, the initiative came from extra-parliamentary movements, which in turn benefitted from their interactions—never free of conflict—with left-wing actors in the state apparatus. In the case of DWE, it is unclear whether this link will hold. Much will depend on the work of an expert

commission that was set up by the Senate after the successful referendum in order to review the legal viability of an expropriation.²

What can be learned from this for Lützerath, and how can significant changes still be initiated? [A moratorium](#) on the further extraction of coal would be an important first step, similar to the one suggested by more than 700 scientists on January 11. Their idea was to stop the destruction of Lützerath and "to provide an opportunity for a transparent dialogue process with all stakeholders to develop sustainable ways of transforming society and time to review the underlying decision-making premises."

A moratorium would not be transformative *per se*, but it could be filled in a transformative sense if the "how much" and "for what" questions facing social (energy) production were discussed. The climate crisis and the war on Ukraine make clear that we must fundamentally change our deeply unsustainable ways of producing and using energy. This implies a dismantling of motorized individual transport and industrial agriculture, but also a rethinking of the supposed "silver bullet" of digitalization, which is becoming ever more energy-intensive. These questions are also posed directly or indirectly in "Lützerath"—and they require a sustainable answer that expresses solidarity with the rest of the globe.

² Politically, the prospects of expropriation have deteriorated since the repetition of the elections to the Berlin House of Representatives. Instead of the former red-red-green coalition between the Social Democrats, the Left, and the Greens, a black-red alliance between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats is going to govern Berlin. The Christian Democrats have fought the expropriation from the beginning, as has the right wing of the Social Democrats, led by the city's former mayor, Franziska Giffey.

(IL)LIBERAL CLIMATE POPULISM

by Erik Swyngedouw

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The notion of Culture Wars—and, with it, the rise of illiberal populist regimes and political movements—is customarily mobilized by self-styled cosmopolitan, enlightened, truth-embracing, and assumedly progressive liberals who consider themselves to be stalwart defenders of a democratic, humanist, socially inclusive, and free society. This contribution contests this Manichean view by arguing that populist discourse and practice is not the prerogative solely of right-wing, autocratic, xenophobic, and nationalist movements with a penchant for spinning facts.

Taking the “climate emergency” as my point of departure, I argue that most mainstream—as well as many radical—climate discourses, practices, and policies are formally similar to populist arguments and should be considered an integral part of a deepening process of [illiberal post-politicization](#). I argue that, through a process that [Slavoj Žižek](#) calls “fetishistic disavowal,” the climate discourse produces a particular form of populism that obscures the power relations responsible for the growth of greenhouse gas emissions. The resulting process sustains unsustainability in an effort to make sure nothing really changes. To account for this seemingly paradoxical condition of both acknowledging and denying the truth of the climate situation, I mobilize a broadly Lacanian-Marxist perspective.

I make three key interventions. First, I argue that populist reason is not the prerogative solely of deluded masses who invest their libidinal attachment in the post-truth discourses of autocratic leaders who present themselves as anti-elitist. Populist reason can also be part of the discourse and practice of liberal humanists, who insist that they put their faith in truth and science and claim to take seriously the socio-ecological [condition](#). Second, I mobilize a Lacanian analysis according to which any form of populism is fundamentally predicated on processes of “[verleugnung](#)” (denial) of an unsymbolized or unsymbolizable trauma, a lack around which desire (for a more environmentally sensible and socially inclusive planetary order) [circulates](#). This denial can be understood as a defense mechanism that prevents what is (because too big or too threatening) unacceptable or unthinkable to the conscious mind from being symbolically articulated. Such articulation would arouse unbearable anxiety and call into question

deep libidinal attachments (what Jacques Lacan called *Jouissance*) to existing practices and conditions. This denial has strong parallels with what is commonly understood as populist reason. It is precisely this mechanism that structures what Lacanians call “fetishistic disavowal.” Consider, for example, how surplus CO₂ and CH₄ (greenhouse gases) are foregrounded as the source of the climate problem; dealing with this “excess,” it is posited, would return the earth and earthlings to a stable and more socio-ecologically benign situation. Of course, such an Arcadian and idyllic socio-climatic order never really existed to be lost. Finally, I shall suggest that resisting the “populist temptation” requires transgressing the foundational populist fantasies that sustain and legitimize the climate consensus.

The Reality of the Climate and Its Denial

Over the last three decades, a wide political, social, and scientific consensus about the urgency of climate action has been crafted, alongside new institutional and governance arrangements, new market instruments (like carbon trading), and new eco-technologies. Despite these significant efforts, the condition of the climate keeps getting systematically worse. Between 1990 and 2018, global carbon emissions rose by 65% and continue to rise, in extremely close correlation with global GDP growth. The concentration of atmospheric CO₂ likewise continues to rise, hitting a [record high](#) of more than 417 ppm in December 2021.

These data demonstrate the paradoxical situation we are facing: access to knowledge and facts does not guarantee effective intervention and sustainable transformation. While many interlocutors support the measures taken, few have faith in their capacity to transform the socio-climatic regime. A rise of 2-4 degrees Celsius in average temperature before the end of the century is now unavoidable, suggesting that many climate interventions are impotent techno-managerial dispositives that are nonetheless triumphantly declared capable of stabilizing climate change.

The paradox of the situation lies in the fact that many people (including those who take climate change seriously) simultaneously acknowledge these facts as scientific truth while continuing to act as if they do not know. This suggests a [cognitive dissonance](#), a split whereby subjects fully recognize the truth of the situation yet continue doing what they have always done—or, at best, slightly adjust individual consumption patterns (recycling, vegetarianism, *flugscham* (flight shaming), etc.). More radical climate movements, like Extinction Rebellion or Youth for Climate, that insist on the need for economic and political elites to listen to the “scientists” in order to change the history of the future, garner media interest but largely fail to direct policies in socio-ecologically transformative ways.

This situation, I suggest, represents a case of what psychoanalysts term “fetishistic disavowal,” succinctly summarized by [Octavio Mannoni](#) as “I know well [the truth of climate change], but all the same (I act as if I do not know).” This, is discernible in much of individual climate action: in the words of [Slavoj Žižek](#), “I know very well that I cannot really influence the process which can lead to my ruin, but it is nonetheless too traumatic for me to accept this, so I cannot resist the urge to do something, even if I know it is ultimately meaningless.” Fetishistic disavowal refers to living through an ideological fantasy that structures the practices of social life in such a way that we can both know the truth of the situation and act in a different way—without losing subjective or social consistency or coherence. With respect to climate change, this refers not to climate denial, but rather to the repression, disavowal, or foreclosure of the real mechanisms that produce the climate crisis—namely what [David Harvey](#) calls the “mad dance of accumulation,” driven by the expanded circulation of capital and choreographed by class dynamics and other socio-ecological conflicts and struggles that animate this process—and their displacement around a fetishized “thing” (greenhouse gases) that becomes the quilting point around which both fear and hope revolve and discourse and action crystallize (what Lacanians call *Objet a*—the object-cause of desire). As such, ecology operates as “[the new opium for the masses.](#)”

On Populist Reason and Climate Populism

There is now a vast literature on populism. Discussing the full range of perspectives on populism is beyond the scope of this contribution, but some key characteristics can be enumerated. First, populism assumes the foundational existence of The People, which are invoked discursively as a normative, empirically verifiable, and fundamentally coherent category and presence. Populism is predicated upon an imaginary of an undivided People as distinct from the heterogeneous collection that comprises a population. Second, the above assumptions and politically normative principles are supposed to be undermined or eroded by “the Elites,” a diffuse but assumedly all-powerful assemblage of economic, political, and cultural actors that—in the name of generic signifiers like (in the present context) multi-culturalism, liberalism, capitalist globalization, humanity, identitarian empowerment, and/or cultural equality—secretly pursue their own desires and class interests, thereby undermining and/or perverting the organic [Whole of the People](#).

Third, the imaginary coherence of the people as a unit is predicated upon the construction of a supernumerary outsider, who is cast as an existential threat that invades the fundamentally healthy body politic of the People and constitutes the object-cause of all manner of problems, potentially leading to the catastrophic disintegration of the [Body of the People](#). In Lacanian

terminology, the constitutive outsiders revel in a surplus enjoyment stolen from the People, thereby undermining the possibility of full enjoyment by [The People](#). This symbolic universe points to the political course of action to be taken, which centers on a combination of changing the internal elite configuration and eliminating (if need be, heavy-handedly), sequestering, or excluding the alien intruder deemed responsible for the disintegration of the People and the [theft of their enjoyment](#). The mobilization of these strategic dispositives, in turn, covers up and represses the Real of the internal conflicts, heterogeneities, and diffuse power relationships that cut through the People and render it inherently unstable, fractious, and contradictory.

The above brief enumeration of the key threads of populism makes it possible to explore the parallel configuration that is the architecture around much of environmental—and, in particular, climate change—discourse and policy. Indeed, there are uncanny formal similarities between right-wing xeno-nationalist populism, on the one hand, and presumably progressive, liberal, and consensual climate arguments, on the other (see, among others, [here](#) and [here](#)). Let me enumerate the configuration of climate populism.

1. First, there is a very particular discursive structuring of the nature of Nature (and the climate) as a fundamentally coherent and stable—albeit dynamic and complex—condition in terms of its capacity to nurture the emergence and historical development of “humanity.” This foundational, external, and “supportive” Nature is disturbed, transformed, and thrown off course by human activity. In this way, Nature’s nurturing capacity may be fundamentally perturbed, thereby jeopardizing the [“sustainability” of humanity as we know it](#). The key intruders that threaten to disturb that presumably original but now “lost” benign climate-society articulation are greenhouse gases.
2. Second, while the socio-ecological origins of climate change are readily acknowledged, the causal force of Nature is nonetheless reinforced. As [Neil Smith](#) argues, “[i]t might well be society’s fault for changing nature, but it is the consequent power of that nature that brings on the apocalypse”; therefore, it is the chemico-physical composition of the atmosphere that requires adjustment in order to both restore climate balance and avert a catastrophic future.

3. Third, this maneuver permits the fetishization of CO₂¹ (and other calamitous climate “things”) as the object-cause of the totality of the climate situation, thereby translating the envisaged catastrophe into a crisis to be managed using techno-managerial mechanisms without ever questioning the fundamental socio-ecological relations that constitute the problem in the first place.
4. Fourth, the climate catastrophe is constituted as a universal humanitarian threat, an “externally” constituted enemy that represents a lurking danger and thus requires sequestration or elimination.
5. Fifth, greenhouse gases are thereby conceived as an excessive remainder, a supernumerary, an *intruder* who has *corrupted* the system.
6. Sixth, this leads to a particular policy strategy that focuses on the “pathological” phenomenon (the symptom) and the development of prophylactic [immunological dispositives](#), such as carbon-saving technology, sequestration programs, retrofitting, carbon markets, nudging consumer behavior, and energy transition. The “enemy” thus remains socially disembodied, objectified, and homogenized.
7. Seventh, the climate problematic and challenge are conjured in the “Name of the People” and supported by an assumedly neutral scientific technocracy.
8. Eighth, the ecological problem, in its populist guise, does not invite a transformation of the existing socio-ecological order, but rather calls on elites to undertake action such that nothing really has to change, enabling life to continue more or less as before. In this sense, the climate consensus is inherently reactionary, an ideological (or, rather, imaginary) support structure for sustaining the socio-political status quo, producing an assumedly immunological protection that secures our libidinal attachment to the present order.
9. Ninth, climate demands are customarily aimed at elites, pressing them to take action. The demands are inherently non-partisan and apparently non-ideological.

¹ This is an analogy to Marx’s concept of fetishization. For example, we all know that money *an sich* is a worthless piece of paper or a number in an account; its inscribed value is structured through social relations of appropriation, production, and reproduction. Nevertheless, we endow it with all manner of real value and power and act accordingly.

10. Tenth, there is a tendency to displace climate problems by means of a socio-technical “fix” that generates a new set of socio-ecological problems and therefore reconfigures, but does not solve, the underlying environmental problems.
11. Eleventh, the climate discourse imagines a generic catastrophic future for the People if no remedial action is taken, but dwells in pure negativity on a dystopian possibility to be averted, leaving it without an embodied socio-ecological political project that would respond to the real possibility of a different socio-ecological future.

In sum, and parallel to the political analysis of populist formations, the hegemonic climate argument papers over the heterogeneities of often conflicting and antagonistic (inter-)human relations and human/non-human interactions, marginalizes constitutive social and class differences, disavows the climate impact of capitalist accumulation dynamics, and forecloses democratic conflicts about possible different socio-ecological configurations by distilling a common threat to both Nature and Humanity. Indeed, populist discourse “displaces social antagonism and constructs the enemy ... [T]he enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity [excessive CO₂] ... whose annihilation would restore [balance and justice](#).”

Traversing the Trauma and Encircling the Real, or How Not to Succumb to the Populist Temptation

Transgressing the populist climate fantasy requires traversing the imaginaries that elevate a thing (like greenhouse gases) to the object-cause of desire (*objet a*). Such re-quilting of fantasy undermines the hold “the thing” has as an embodiment of the (impossible) promise of enjoyment and displaces it to a different terrain, one that no longer eschews “the encounter with the Real,” or those processes and concerns that that have been repressed, disavowed or foreclosed. In this concluding section, we shall attempt to encircle parts of the Real that are repressed due to the lure of certain fantasies, thereby contributing to re-orienting desire around a different “object-cause of desire.” Encircling the Real of climate change implies, among other things, the re-symbolization of the imaginary upon which the urgency of environmental action is legitimized and sustained while re-articulating the “thing” around which desire for a more benign environment in a socially inclusive world circulates. Opening up different political-ecological trajectories requires transgressing the fantasy that conceals these traumas.

The Catastrophe Has Already Happened!

First, the climate emergency portrays a dystopian future if no appropriate action is taken. This view implies that it is not too late—that the projected future can still be deflected. However, many people around the world are already living in a socio-ecological apocalypse, as evidenced by the large numbers of climate refugees and the mounting socio-ecological problems experienced by the [poorest members of the world's population](#). The climate catastrophe is indeed a [combined and uneven one](#), a promise for some and a reality for others. Sustaining catastrophic imageries is an integral part of the new cultural politics of capitalism, for which the management of fear is a central leitmotif, and provides part of the cultural support for a process of [environmental-populist post-politicization](#). The presentation of climate change as potentially catastrophic for all produces a thoroughly depoliticized imaginary, one that does not identify adversaries in a political process or articulate with specific political programs of socio-ecological transformation.

Transgressing this fantasy cuts through this deadlock. The revelatory promise of the apocalyptic narrative, as well as the redemptive (but impotent) insistence on the importance of behavioral and eco-techno-managerial change, have to be rejected wholesale. In the face of dystopian imaginaries mobilized to ensure that the apocalypse will NOT happen at some future moment, the only reasonable response is that it is already too late for many—that the catastrophe is already here. There is no Arcadian place, time, or environment to which to return, no benign socio-ecological past or ideal climate that needs to be reconstructed or maintained. It is only through an acknowledgment of the apocalyptic reality of the now that a new politics might emerge. Directing the environmental gaze to the perspective of those who are barely surviving the collapse of their socio-ecological conditions opens up a wide range of new ways of addressing socio-ecological realities and inaugurates a vast terrain of political and socio-technical interventions different from those that currently dominate.

"Humanity" Cannot Be Saved

Second, the consensual climate discourse insists on the imminent danger climate change poses to the future of humanity. Humanity, in this context, is not just the sum total of humans living on Earth, but human civilization, characterized by a range of shared beliefs, ethics, and principles (such as liberty, solidarity, equality, and civic rights). As [Maurice Blanchot](#) argued, such a view is predicated on the fantasy that "humanity" actually exists—that there is a global human civilization that deserves salvation. However, the Real of the human presence on Earth exposes the empty core of

“humanity.” The multiple tensions and conflicts between groups of people and the unspeakable violence inflicted by humans against humans testify to this “emptiness,” despite occasional manifestations of a deep humanity shared by some.

It is precisely this emptiness that is denied. The disavowed knowledge that there is no such thing as “humanity” constitutes a repressed trauma. Pervasive inequality, rampant unequal power relations, the incessant dispossession of some people of their livelihoods, and the continuous objective and subjective violence inflicted by some humans on others are all symptoms of the radical antagonisms and conflicts that cut through the human collective and signal that a communitarian “humanity” has never existed—and indeed may never exist, unless sustained political fidelity to the possibility, if not necessity, of its making is inaugurated. The climate discourse’s disavowal of the barbarism that also characterizes humanity is a classic form of traumatic repression. The fundamental challenge is the choice between an apocalyptic future that speeds ahead precisely because of the absence of “humanity” or the [actual construction of a “humanity”](#) now that would turn the course of the future in a more benign direction. The issue is, therefore, not ensuring the future of a non-existent humanity, but the *creation* of a humanity.

Conclusion: “The People” Do Not Exist

This contribution has focused on the parallels between populism and a range of climate discourses and practices. Indeed, a significant post-truth imaginary seeps into the dominant climate discourse: a phantasmagoria of an abstract and virtual, but nonetheless threatened, global humanity. In the process, the Real of class, capital, and other antagonisms that cut through the semblance of humanity come to be considered irrelevant or at least subordinate. The fetishistic repression, disavowal, or foreclosure of these antagonisms, which form the matrix of the social, ensures that nothing will really change. Traversing the present fantasy of a just climate transition through techno-managerial and (neo)liberal consumerist adjustments requires recognizing the trauma of the non-existence of humanity and that it is this non-existence that has already caused the climate catastrophe. Traversing this fantasy is predicated upon reversing the dominant argument by recognizing that the apocalypse has already happened and the only thing left to do is to engage in a process of constructing a real “humanity”—of producing a human world in the world. This necessitates foregrounding radical politicization.

In other words, if we really want to take the ecological condition seriously, we have to displace the question of ecology from a populist frame to the terrain of agonistic politicization, animated by a sustained fidelity to what

[Alain Badiou](#) calls a passion for the real possibility and necessity of an egalitarian common world. It is through such a political project that a common and enabling climate might be constituted. First and foremost, we have to insist that there is no alternative.

HYPERMODERN HYGIENISM AND THE LEFT: TOWARD A POSTIDEOLOGICAL TOTALITARIANISM

By Tove Soiland

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On November 28, 2021, the people of Switzerland voted on the so-called “Covid-19-Law,” established to retroactively legitimize the measures taken by the Swiss state to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Thirty-eight percent of the population opposed the law. Despite this result, the constantly repeated official narrative is that a preponderance of the Swiss population approved of the protective measures against the coronavirus and only a negligible minority did not. But almost 40 percent of the population is not a minority. And we can assume that the result would have been similar in other countries, had there been comparable referenda. But at no point during the last two and a half years did this part of the population gain the status of a political opposition. Rather, critics were condemned as irrational and thereby denied political recognition. Yet a public political debate about the proportionality of the global anti-Covid measures would certainly have been merited, especially considering that SARS-CoV-2 would not have qualified as a pandemic had the criteria for defining a spreading disease as a “pandemic” not been changed by the WHO in 2009.¹ If we take into account that from the beginning of the crisis the media massively downplayed the global protests against the preventive measures, it is not entirely wrong to say that Covid-19 was the first

¹ Until 2009, the WHO defined a pandemic as follows: “An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus appears against which the human population has no immunity, resulting in several, simultaneous epidemics worldwide with enormous numbers of deaths and illness. With the increase in global transport and communications, as well as urbanization and overcrowded conditions, epidemics due the new influenza virus are likely to quickly take hold around the world.” (<http://web.archive.org/web/20061230201645/www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic/en/print.html>.) The criterion of high mortality was omitted in 2009; only the worldwide spread was kept in place. Without a doubt, Covid-19 can be a very dangerous illness for certain groups of people. Notably, however, the criterion of “enormous numbers of deaths” does not apply to Covid-19: according to the current state of knowledge, the infection fatality rate (IFR) of Covid-19 is 0.314 percent worldwide (with salient regional differences) (cf. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)02867-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)02867-1/fulltext)). Thus, it cannot be compared to such pandemics as the Spanish Flu. For comparison, the IFR of seasonal influenza is around 0.1–0.2 percent.

pandemic whose existence the people had to be persuaded of, as the [*Manifeste Conspirationniste*](#) puts it (p. 8).

This situation is new—and somewhat incomprehensible, especially against the backdrop of European history. German history, in particular, shows how easy it is to misuse medicine to dress up political illiberalism in the cloak of science and progress. In this case, however, the illiberal tendency originated on the Left. This runs contrary to the broad consensus among social scientists since World War II that illiberal tendencies—and hence the danger of a new authoritarianism—are to be found on the right of the political spectrum.

For political observers with a Marxist background, such as the author of this paper, it was therefore disconcerting to see that large parts of the Left not only approved of the mitigation measures implemented by the state from the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, but even became leading advocates thereof. Nor was it only leftist parties that were part of governments—and therefore represented the interests of the state—which backed the measures. Indeed, the non-parliamentary Left, which had to that point been rather skeptical of the state, rallied unreservedly behind the measures—and sometimes, as in the case of the “Zero Covid” initiative, even called for tightening them further. Therefore, this urban milieu of young adults, which also comprises large parts of culturalist-leftist academia, had condemned each minuscule disciplining by the state and accused it of violent normalizations (of gender, for instance). Overnight, this milieu became a staunch defender of state measures that are without precedent in terms of their rigor and impact on the most intimate spheres of life. This coalition of “radical left-wing” and “left-liberal” forces had already announced itself by expressing support for handling social problems through individual sacrifice. During the Covid-19 crisis, this escalated into a veritable *dispositif* of self-incrimination, articulating the ungrounded but firm belief that people not only contributed to causing this misery (that the virus was, perhaps, an effect of our immoderate ways of life), but also that we could effectively combat it by way of self-sacrifice.

I see this approval of state measures as the expression of a hope (a false hope, in my opinion) that, through their rigor, these measures might put the critique of the bourgeois subject, accomplished by a twentieth-century critique of subjectivity, into practice, notably by subordinating its proclaimed self-identity to the necessities of the social [common good](#). This hope seems misguided to me because the problem of self-identity is merely transferred from the individual subject to some kind of an overall subject (the *Volkskörper*: think “herd immunity”). With this transfer, nothing is gained in terms of decentralization of the subject: true, the individual now

seems to be deprived of power, but not the *Volkskörper*, to which the phantasm of self-identity is transferred.

In this paper, I will not, however, defend any type of freedom against the demands of a social collective. To do so would only contribute to the classical conflict between Left and Right. Rather, I think that we are dealing with a new phenomenon: that segment of the Left that approved of the mitigation measures was fervently opposed to a critique of Covid politics even when it was formulated from a decidedly [leftist viewpoint](#). This position was illiberal because it did not accept criticism of the anti-Covid measures as a possible leftist position, but declared it to be illegitimate, right-wing or even right-wing extremist. Instead of opposing the further [reduction](#) of hospital beds, which was even expedited during the pandemic; instead of pointing out that nursing staff were overburdened because of [systemic underfinancing](#) and thus an *actively promoted* reduction of hospital staff; instead of denouncing the fact that the lockdowns were first and foremost an economic catastrophe for the countries of the [global South](#) and amounted to a declaration of war against the poor in capitalist centers as well, the left-wing supporters of anti-Covid measures focused on criticizing the critics of these measures.

Why has the Left never pointed out that the measures were class-biased? It soon became clear that the initial euphoria at a reinvigorated state, which was seen as a new version of the Keynesian welfare state, was an illusion, as the enormous economic damages brought about by the lockdowns could never be compensated for by public counter-measures, especially not for the poorer strata of the population. But this did not change their position at all: the leftists not only did not focus their critique on classes, but also—and paradoxically—condemned those who made the class argument as right-wing. This calls for an explanation.

A New Accumulation Regime

The initial idea that the state had finally started to value the protection of lives higher than the interests of capital has proved to be erroneous. Although we might not yet be capable of fully integrating the events of the last three years into the big picture, we have reason to argue that the pandemic regime did not harm the interests of capital at all. Rather, the anti-Covid measures have promoted a new accumulation regime, which became necessary for reasons internal to capitalism. Since the major economic crisis of the 1970s, one question has remained unanswered: Has capitalism ever managed to really overcome that crisis, which was caused by stagnating productivity and thus declining profit rates, and to stop the drift of investment-seeking capital to the financial sector? Or have we lived in some kind of constantly delayed crisis ever since?

The Covid-19 crisis and the acceleration of digitalization represented a turning point. The economic historian [Andrea Komlosy](#) states that the digitalization imposed by the Covid measures has paved the way for the future development of a cybernetic capitalism—or maybe even helped to establish it already. But this “cybernetic turn” no longer concerns the production sphere, which is already widely digitized. Rather, it targets the interaction of humans and digital networks—which is now technically possible—for the purpose of optimizing human life on the basis of technical means. Thus, it opens up a huge field of investment. This could be the gateway to a new economic upswing, with MANBRIC-Technologies ([Grinin & Grinin](#)) as the new leading technology and a digitized health care economy as the new leading sector.

Against the backdrop of these business-cycle ideas, the anti-Covid measures take on the role—intended or not—of a “creative destruction,” as Joseph Schumpeter put it, that paves the way for innovations necessary for the further accumulation of capital. Similarly, [Shosana Zuboff](#) argues that the digitized way of life opens up major new possibilities for generating profit because we have become involuntary producers of the most important raw material, namely data, which we leave as digital traces. “Surveillance capitalism,” as she calls this new “form of production,” can use these data to generate profit in undreamed-of dimensions. From a different angle, [Fabio Vighi](#) argues that behind the Covid-19 crisis loomed from the fall of 2019 a gigantic financial crisis that could only be deflected by flooding the financial markets with unprecedented liquidity. According to Vighi, the [lockdowns](#) bought some time by cooling down the economy. Without insinuating that the measures were invented for this purpose, they proved to be equally useful for flattening another curve: the danger of hyperinflation resulting from this influx of liquidity.

The fact that we are now witnessing somewhat more moderate but continuous inflation seems to confirm Vighi’s assertion. Not only did the big collapse fail to happen, but the economy is now enjoying record profits once more—which, of course, is not to say that people are better off. Whether intended or not, we must in retrospect note that by implementing anti-Covid measures, the state has helped to establish a new way of life that has opened up new markets for capitalism facing a deep crisis of valorization—perhaps even paving the way for a new economic boom. Against this backdrop, the state authoritarianism that manifested itself in the anti-Covid measures appears in a different light: as a stabilization of capital interests by authoritarian means.

Already by the 1960s and 1970s, authors like [Nicos Poulantzas](#), [Johannes Agnoli](#), and [Franz Neumann](#) were warning of the risks of interpreting the

emergence of totalitarianism solely as an unfriendly takeover of the state by groups hostile to the state. They claimed, instead, that totalitarian tendencies were inherent to the capitalist mode of production and located within the state, which vouches for this mode of production. Under the heading “inverted totalitarianism,” [Sheldon S. Wolin](#)—and, in a slightly different form, [Hannes Hofbauer](#) and [Giorgio Agamben](#)—thinks along these lines by pointing out that totalitarian tendencies can very well take root in Western democracies. Since the beginnings of neoliberalism in the 1980s, this has been addressed frequently. But whereas the increasingly illiberal forms of neoliberalism had been broadly criticized by the Left before the Covid-19 crisis under the umbrella of “authoritarian neoliberalism,” this critique has since stopped—even though the new authoritarianism, in many regards, inherits the authoritarian character of neoliberalism or at least fits into it without any problems (if illiberality is not already at the core of neoliberalism).

With this, we find ourselves in a new situation. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (if not before), and presumably without knowing it, the Left has become a decisive force of integration for this new illiberalism. This development raises two questions that point to two ways of tackling the problem: on the one hand, it raises the question of why capital is seeking its most important allies on the Left; on the other, we have to ask why the Left is giving up its historical distance from capital.

First and foremost, this lack of distance may be due to a historical shift in the ideological state apparatus. We are dealing with a confusing situation, as the authoritarian state serves the interests of capital—and thus acts like what is commonly called a right-wing authoritarian state—but without having to resort to ideologies we think of as right-wing: open racism, conservative values, and a firm anti-egalitarianism. On the contrary, the current state clothes itself in political correctness. Its exponents are not charismatic leaders, but experts committed to a cause. Their language is objective, they refer to facts, they are solution-oriented out of conviction. Ideologies are (ostensibly) strange to them. And this is what gives them their integrating power: they stand for an open-minded, multicultural society and they talk a lot about inclusion. This state—and this capitalism—has no use for the old regalia of right-wing ideologies. These, I dare to say, have even become dysfunctional for the demands of today’s accumulation of capital. This is why capitalism that keeps itself alive with the help of an authoritarian state looks for allies today not in the ranks of the political Right, but within the Left, which stands for precisely these values: open-mindedness and progressiveness.

With this, the Left has taken over the historical role of the Right. In the 1920s and 1930s, capital aimed at an alliance with the Right in order to ward off the danger of a socialist revolution looming in the West—as well as because of the Great Depression. To do this, capital needed the help of the Right’s ideology: racism and the readiness to use violence that was associated with it.

But now, the situation is different. I believe that today, the danger emanates not from the Right, but from this novel coalition between capital and a leftist state. The state comes to the aid of capital with authoritarian means, but its actual authoritarianism does not seem authoritarian to us because it is cloaked in a leftist value system. If we stare, as if spell-bound, at what has happened on the fringes of demonstrations against the anti-Covid measures, we fail to understand that right-wing ideology and the right-wing state are drifting apart and to perceive the new danger that lies in the very consensual alliance between the Left and the state in the service of capital interests.

In what follows, I will argue that this new coalition is only possible against the background of a development I will call—following the Italian psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati—“postideological totalitarianism” (or at least a tendency toward it). This is a completely new or novel form of totalitarianism that largely does without the characteristic features of its twentieth-century precursors.

Hypermodern Hygienism in the Postideological Constellation

The term “postideological totalitarianism” was coined by [Massimo Recalcati](#) in a paper [first published](#) in 2007, in which he connects it with something he calls, tellingly, “hypermodern hygienism.” Unsurprisingly, the field in which this hypermodern hygienism plays out is the domain of (public) health. Therefore, in Recalcati’s analysis, public health is the decisive hinge for this novel form of totalitarianism. With the term “postideological,” Recalcati aims to describe an ideological constellation that no longer sees itself as such. The tendency of this constellation is totalitarian because it lacks any kind of ideal and therefore no longer has any sense of a “beyond.” “Postideological totalitarianism is not a worldview, but the demise of any possible worldview” (p. 352/Ital. p. 319). It smothers, Recalcati writes, life with a presence (a kind of immanence of pure life) that can associate unreservedly with that which has taken the place of the missing ideal: a scientism that steps up to take care of the improvement of life. This postideological form of the totalitarian does not use power by way of “terror or discipline,” but rather governs life “horizontally” (p. 338/Ital. p. 310), as Recalcati puts it. This “horizontal

governance” is guided by highly specialized knowledge and its scientific-technical practices:

Without resorting to barbaric forms of violence, biopolitical power promotes aseptic procedures of evaluation, through which it supports the gray power of a hyper-specialized knowledge, thus ascertaining the influence of technical-scientific practices on the governance of life. These no longer take on the brutal forms of censorship or repressive prohibitions, but rather take the shape of a general quantification of life, which is misinterpreted as progressive (p. 353/Ital. p. 320).

This power can hardly be called repressive because it presents itself as an offer: the quantification of life only serves the purpose of creating parameters which allow for the provision of information about the wellbeing of the population. This “horizontal governance of life” does not aim (vertically) at an ideal that reaches beyond it, but at the immanent goal of pure optimizability that does not refer to anything beyond itself, as if caught in a cybernetic loop. In this light, the postideological comes across as the ideological equivalent of cybernetic self-regulation: the only ideal it knows is incessant improvement. This is its hermetic core because, in this way, “the requirements of the Good become a universal measure” (p. 337/Ital. p. 309), Recalcati writes. The “ideology of wellbeing” (*ibid.*) first reduces the human to their health, for which it then provides a universally valid measure. Maybe this “hygienic ideal of health” (p. 333/Ital. p. 307) is the last remaining ideal—and itself becomes an all-encompassing demand:

This is the paradox of hypermodern hygienism: the protection of health becomes a protocol that we have to abide by as a new social obligation – as an unprecedented imperative of the Good (p. 354/Ital. p. 320).

Following Jacques Lacan, Recalcati claims that totalitarianism is not defined by its relation to the Evil, but by its relation to the Good, which takes on the (inverse) form of a moral and social demand. As an imperative emanating from the superego, this Good has a libidinal and even a sadistic component, as Freud observed: It has to be implemented at any price. “In this imposition of the measure of the Good, or, if you will, in this moral utilization of the Good as universal measure for happiness” lies—in Recalcati’s words—the essence of totalitarianism according to Lacan (p. 338/Ital. p. 310).

For the Lacanian psychoanalyst [Colette Soler](#), the main aim of this “generalized hygienism” (p. 56) is to replace the soul with something medical. Medical knowledge has become the “new master signifier,” as she puts it, especially because we do not deal with “real science and its blind spots and debates, but with the idea of science as such” (p. 53). This construct “science” becomes, as a kind of substitute for religion, the new global “subject supposed to know” (p. 52). But if we suppose this subject to know, it can hardly appear to us to be violent:

As we believe in this science-subject supposed to know, the obedience to its imperative seems to be justified and nobody hits on the idea that this implies a voluntary serfdom that we would denounce if we dealt with the obedience to any other master, be it the *Führer*, Father Stalin or a *pater familias*. The Italian philosopher Agamben rightly qualifies medicine as a religion, it is the current subject supposed to know. [...] A knowledge which seduces the political master, because the state allocates the money. Today, brains, genes, hormones, etc., are thought to control our emotions, our behavior or even that which psychoanalysis calls symptoms and which in times past used to be called torments of the soul. But we don’t have souls any more, we have brains, genomes, neurons, hormones, etc. (p. 53-54).

Once the soul has taken this form, it can easily be treated with all sorts of technical devices. It can also be subjected to standardization. Eventually, hypermodern hygienism comes down to finding a general “measure for desire,” as Recalcati writes. This measure would indicate the right relation to happiness, “in accordance with a moral pedagogy gone mad,” ultimately defining “that which shall be the living conditions of desire for everybody” (p. 337/339/Ital. p. 309/310).

While traditional hygienism—which was a movement in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century, comparable to the *Lebensreform* movements in Germany—still focused on strengthening the immune system, hypermodern hygienism puts its faith in the technical achievements of modern life sciences, which are able to substitute the inner lives of humans, as well as their immune systems, for something artificial and, thus, better.

Today’s ideological constellation is characterized by this scientism, which has itself made recourse to a [technocratic solutionism](#), in conjunction with the social Good. This constellation has to be called postideological because it

claims to have no other content than putting itself at the service of optimizing the common good. This scientism both resonates with a left-wing value system and holds out the prospect of miraculously solving the problem of valorization of capital.

If we follow Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum in Davos, the new accumulation regime relies on the digitalization of work, but even more so of life itself. It aligns with the project of transhumanism, with its two pillars: scientism (a scientifically founded way of living) and consumption. But here, consumption primarily means the consumption of *technical devices* that aim to unite humans and technology.

From this perspective, the ideal person and employee has no children and no care duties. He works from home on a screen, where he also usually consumes his goods: from sex to his partner to health care services and visits to a (virtual) landscape. The idea that human nature can continuously be optimized by technical-cybernetic means—the transhumanist project—has no use for conservative values like family. Rather, it needs young, male, technophile, open-minded, and progressive people who feel comfortable in multicultural teams as well as at sterile airports, and who believe in the technical designing of the future human, the future environment, and future production. Progressive values mesh with this much better than racism; tolerance, open-mindedness, and a belief in progress are called for.

As this *technocratic solutionism* could simultaneously solve the problem of falling profit margins (because unlike care work, which creates little value, technical solutions can increase productivity), it turns out to be a “lucky find”—for the state, which is facing the increasing cost of social services, and for capital, which supplements these services with technical devices—thus opening up a gigantic new market.

Translated by Bernadette Grubner

HUNGARIAN CULTURE WAR IN THE COVID ERA: WHAT IT WAS, WHAT IT WASN'T, AND WHAT IT COULD HAVE BEEN

By Anna Réz

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The restrictive regulations and vaccine policies imposed in response to the COVID-19 virus sparked widespread ideological disagreements and controversies in many countries, and Hungary was no exception. These conflicts, which infected the public discourse—including political and social commentaries written by journalists, mass public opinion expressed on social media, and, most worryingly, people's most intimate relationships—bear significant resemblance to what social scientists would label as a culture war.

In Hungary, however, there was no culture war—at least in the usual sense. Both Fidesz-KDNP, the ruling coalition since 2010, and its liberal-leftist opposition (united for the 2022 general election) promoted lockdown and vaccination policies, although with somewhat different tones and to somewhat different degrees. In fact, the two major political sides competed to outstrip each other's sincere concern for the life and health of the Hungarian people: while the opposition constantly and vehemently accused the ruling party of irresponsibly failing to protect people by not introducing more regulations (and sooner), Fidesz ran a campaign at the beginning of 2021 labeling the opposition parties “anti-vaxxers” because they protested against the rollout of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine, which these parties claimed was ineffective. Only the extreme right-wing party Our Homeland protested against the Covid measures, primarily against mandatory vaccination policies for some professions and vaccine passports. Our Homeland had no representatives in the Hungarian Parliament in this period, but established a parliamentary presence shortly thereafter, in the general elections of 2022.

Skepticism of Covid Measures: An Anti-Establishment Enterprise

So there was no culture war—at least not between the established conservative and progressive political parties. Hence, a puzzle arises: if all

the established political actors and the vast majority of mainstream news outlets supported restrictive regulations and communicated that COVID-19 posed a serious threat to people's life and health, then why did people experience bitter controversies surrounding Covid policies? Who fought with whom? And why, even though virtually every opinion leader and elected politician encouraged people to get vaccinated, have one in three Hungarian adults never been vaccinated? (This proportion is similar to other countries in the region, but significantly lower than in Western European countries.)

Several studies (e.g., [Bíró-Nagy 2022](#), [Kutasi et al. 2022](#), [Goodwin et al. 2022](#), and [Farkas et al. 2022](#)) have attempted to answer these questions, although within a specific theoretical framework. Comprehensive attitudinal studies exploring opinions about *both* social distancing measures (lockdowns, school closures, curfews) *and* vaccination policies are scarce. Most studies have focused on the causes of vaccine hesitancy—partly because Hungary was one of the few countries where the *type* of vaccine recommended (Chinese/Russian versus European/American products) became a political battleground in itself. The results lead in the same direction: while supporters of mainstream political parties were generally willing to accept *some* vaccine (Fidesz voters being even more committed to vaccination than supporters of the united opposition), those who were politically undecided or scored low on general trust in social, political, and scientific institutions were much more hesitant to be vaccinated at all. Quantitative studies and analyses of political discourse point to the same conclusion: virus, lockdown, and vaccine skepticism had a distinctly anti-establishment character. This holds true for political representation as well as media consumption habits. On the one hand, skeptical views were represented politically by the fringe of the extreme far right (which at that time lacked parliamentary representation) and typically held by undecided voters. On the other hand, skeptical viewpoints and “unorthodox” scientific results were typically spread via smaller, less prestigious, and less reliable online platforms (websites and Facebook groups) as opposed to mainstream print and online media outlets.

The studies cited above highlight important connections between general trust level and hesitancy to receive COVID-19 vaccination. However, by focusing exclusively on the vaccination debate, we run the risk of misconstruing the ideological controversies surrounding Covid measures. Most analyses represent the debate as one between “science believers” and “science skeptics.” This general narrative was present from the early days of the pandemic. Mainstream discourse on Covid measures implicitly or explicitly assumed that restrictive policies could and should be based on the evidence and knowledge provided by life scientists, most prominently

virologists, epidemiologists, and medical professionals. Consequently, the assumption that acceptance of these regulations—and obedience to them—depended on people’s scientific knowledge and trust in science has rarely been contested. This presumption has been reflected in the degrading expressions frequently used to describe those skeptical about restrictive policies: “lunatics,” “conspiracy theorists,” “conteo believers,” “science deniers,” etc. Consequently, skeptical viewpoints have been and often still are explained, in social science studies as well as in the public discourse, by low level of education, pathological psychological profiles (such as “paranoia”—see Bíró-Nagy 2022), lack of critical thinking and fact-checking skills, or political conservatism (although the latter is clearly not applicable in the case of Hungary, where Fidesz voters were the most committed to vaccination).

Culture War: How It Was and Wasn’t

From here on, my discussion becomes somewhat speculative. I am a philosopher, not a social scientist, so the best I can strive for is to be consistent with existing results from attitudinal studies while at the same time departing from the dominant narrative, which has affected both the public discourse and the direction of empirical studies conducted in and about the Covid era.

My hypothesis is that the general mistrust in science that became visible in the vaccine debate was not an independent disposition some people already possessed (due to their educational level, political affiliation or psychological profile), but at least partly the *result* of the dominant mainstream national and international discourse about the COVID-19 virus and the regulations that attempted to mitigate the harms it caused. It is worthwhile to note that the first wave of the vaccine rollout occurred after several months of severe restrictions and an almost exclusive public focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. I suspect that many people were generally unsatisfied by and frustrated with the drastic, often poorly justified, and seemingly *ad hoc* regulatory measures that the Hungarian government introduced from March 2020. Although reliable data on attitudes related to lockdown policies are scarce, [one survey](#) conducted at the time of the first vaccine rollout found that 62% of respondents would modify or abandon the curfew regulations. Mainstream media outlets and established political parties did not give voice to these frustrations and complaints; on the contrary, opposing and skeptical voices were regularly suppressed and banished in the name of science and morality. Since the key mainstream narrative was built on the idea that far-reaching social and political decisions that directly and drastically affected people’s everyday lives could be justified *solely* by life-scientific facts and predictions, those who opposed these measures assumed they could only push back by denying these

scientific facts and predictions. Many of them accepted the narrative of their opponents, since no one articulated their concerns in a different conceptual framework, and so they became what they were accused of being: science skeptics.

I am primarily interested in what this different conceptual framework could have looked like—that is, how concerns about the Covid measures could have been articulated on their own terms, without entering into an unpromising debate about life-scientific facts. Most of these concerns *were* in fact articulated by public intellectuals from all political sides—but these scattered criticisms did not add up to a real ideological alternative to the mainstream narrative.

Before I outline the alternative, I would like to briefly return to the concept of culture wars. Although it is common to identify culture wars by reference to the participants in the debate (i.e., conservatives and liberals, as understood in the US), it would be fruitful to revise and supplement this definition. Culture wars have a characteristic emotional dynamic, which makes them an easily recognizable and distinctive social phenomenon. Culture wars typically invoke intense emotions on both sides of the debate and these sentiments (typically anger, resentment, and a sense of justice or righteousness) even intensify as the culture war unfolds. Such emotions rely on evaluative judgements about what is fair, natural or decent, as well as on often vague assumptions about how our social reality works and should work. The dominant emotions of culture wars are backed up by a complex web of thoughts, empirical observations, and value statements. For those who become invested in culture wars, these evaluative judgments are of central importance to their worldview.

What counts as central is obviously dependent on the ideological-political context, which continually shapes these values and their relationship to each other. But some parts of our value system are likely not so directly influenced by the political messages we get. All of us assume some facts to be certain and some values to be the correct ones: about the value of life and death, the nature and importance of human relationships, the role that the state should or should not play in our lives, etc. These assumptions are often hidden and unarticulated until they become contested by others—and even when they do, it can be difficult to express them as clear theoretical or normative statements. When political actors lay the ground for a new culture war, they both rely on these unarticulated assumptions and interpret them in a specific way. A vague sense of cultural pride can easily be turned into xenophobic sentiments; the desire to remain open and flexible to new ideas and social changes can present itself as moral and social contempt toward those who cannot or do not intend to “catch up.”

My central assumption is that culture wars both exploit people's deeply held beliefs and distort these beliefs by interpreting them in a specific way. In the process, unarticulated values and convictions become articulated—but at the same time they often lose their complexity and might even change their emotional character. Positively charged emotions such as pride, a sense of identity or a sense of belonging can transform into hostile sentiments toward “outsiders”; the compelling desire to create a just world can manifest itself as ridicule and impatience toward those who have different priorities.

Now I am in a better position to reformulate my prior thesis. The pandemic and the regulatory measures responding to it have mobilized a wide set of (often implicit and unarticulated) thoughts and judgements. This is hardly surprising: while the pandemic itself confronted us with our basic human condition and provoked thoughts about life, death, and loss in general, the regulatory measures raised complicated questions about personal liberty and collective responsibility, about the role of human relationships in our lives, and about how a good life can be achieved under extraordinary circumstances.

With respect to these fundamental issues, our society is obviously divided. While the majority of people thought (out of either sincere conviction or political loyalty) that the way mainstream political actors responded to the pandemic matched their values and priorities, a significant minority (typically those without strong political commitments) was frustrated because the Covid measures conflicted with some of their implicitly held convictions, which are central to their worldview. Thus, according to my preferred definition, there *was* a culture war in Hungary—and one that did not take place along the lines of political affiliation. However, those unsatisfied with the mainstream narrative could not find strong enough representatives to give coherent content and voice to these convictions. Consequently, they had to rely on the opponent's narrative and take up the role created for them: that of “science deniers.”

How a Real Culture War Would Have Looked: A Philosophical Speculation

Finally, I would like to discuss some central features of the mainstream narrative and show how a values-driven response to these ideological stances could have looked. Although all the building blocks of the following thoughts have previously been shared publicly, I believe they deserve a more systematic expression, which is what I attempt in the rest of this piece.

Uncritical Trust in the Current Results of the Scientific Field

Covid measures in Hungary, as in most European countries, were selected and imposed on the premise that political decision-making must rely on the scientific evidence available at the time. Drastic decisions regarding school closures, mandatory working from home, and the availability of important services were made in a rush and in an unpredictable manner on the basis of virological models, case numbers, and fresh studies regarding immunity, new virus mutations, etc.

The underlying assumption was that science was our “best shot” at doing things right. However, given the complexity of the issues surrounding a global pandemic and the limited scientific knowledge we had at the beginning of the pandemic, it could reasonably have been argued that our best shot was still *not a very good shot*. Science in the making is prone to the same biases and mistakes as virtually all human enterprise. Scientific research is influenced by the budget available; the broader aims of the funders; and the scientific consensus, which is shaped not only by rational reasons, but also by scientific trends, peer pressure, and political-ideological considerations.

Given the unreliability arising from these well-known sociological aspects of the scientific field, complete reliance on recent scientific data could reasonably have been contested. Now, just three years later, no one denies that lockdowns and social-distancing regulations had complex and far-reaching economic, psychological, and social consequences. These consequences could have been better taken into consideration in advance if political action had not been justified almost exclusively by reference to life-scientific results and predictions.

That the scientific field is prone to fallacies is a widely accepted sociological fact among social theorists (see the works of, for example, Bruno Latour and, most recently, [Ioannidis 2022](#) on the unreliability of research findings). What makes science, in the long run, the most reliable source of information is its *method* and capacity for *self-correction*, not its immunity from momentary human failures, viciousness, and biases. Given these inevitable challenges, a sensible anti-lockdown argument would have promoted, as a precaution, the relative prioritization of economic, psychological, and broader social-scientific considerations in political decision-making.

Admittedly, the social sciences are just as prone to making mistakes as the life sciences. What a more holistic and comprehensive approach could have achieved is a more balanced public discourse; probably a more modest and predictable strategy for fighting the most devastating effects of the

pandemic; and the avoidance of the worst long-term consequences, such as a rapid rise in the share of mentally ill children, which has been frequently reported since the beginning of the pandemic.

Techno-Optimism

The Covid era was a golden period for the [tech industry](#). The most radical restrictive measures, such as school closures and the limitation of offline work, were imposed under the assumption that online technological tools could provide a meaningful substitute for previously offline activities. Entire industries (restaurants, cultural institutions, etc.) were forced to find new, Internet-based solutions in order to survive. Some of these changes seem to have had a lasting effect: online meetings, conferences, and trainings; streaming culture; and delivery apps are likely here to stay.

Many might be skeptical of the claim that technological innovation and online tools can meaningfully substitute for previously offline activities and ultimately lead us to a better society. First, an extensive literature explores the risk that technological innovation might lead to a form of digital authoritarianism and ultimately to a previously unprecedented level of political and social control. Second, from the standpoint of social equality, one can point out how rapid technological changes disadvantage those who do not possess the financial means or the digital competences to “catch up.” Third, one can attribute intrinsic value to connections experienced in-person, from the most formal to the most intimate, arguing that any life worth living includes real-life communities where we confront and embrace other people as a whole, including their physical presence and often inadvertent behavior. And fourth, one can simply question the capacity of human beings to adapt to such rapid technological changes and fear the potentially harmful long-term social and psychological effects. It is worth noting that while the first and the second insights usually come from leftist thought, the third and the fourth can rightly be characterized, in the present political context, as conservative concerns. These worries could have formed separate lines of argument in public political discourse.

The State of Emergency and the Suspension of Individual Rights

Covid-era regulatory measures limited and threatened central civil and political rights in Hungary as well as in other countries: the right to free movement, the right to free (political) assembly and association, and the right to bodily autonomy (in the case of mandatory vaccination policies and vaccine passports) were severely curtailed. The Hungarian Parliament operated, for most of 2020, 2021, and until June 2022 under the “danger of crisis,” special state-of-emergency legislation. Parliamentary legislation was

mostly substituted by government decrees through a sweeping takeover of the executive branch ([Drinóczi 2020 et al.](#)). Since 2010 parliamentary deliberation has gradually lost, due to the political maneuvers of the Orbán regime, its potential to exercise political control over the ruling party—but statutory legislation took this process to the next level.

In view of the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Orbán regime, the united opposition and other critics of the regime regularly accused the government of abusing the special powers conferred upon them by the “danger of crisis” to pass regulation in virtually no time and without parliamentary deliberation. However, the regulations contested by the parliamentary opposition were never related to the pandemic—since with regard to Covid restrictions, as previously noted, there was no major disagreement between the ruling coalition and the leftist-liberal opposition. (Where there was disagreement, it was due to the opposition’s demand for increasingly radical restrictions.) The legal justifiability and proportionality of these regulatory steps were questioned only by a few public intellectuals ([Schiffer 2021](#), [Bakó 2020](#)), who are as critical of the Orbán regime as they are of its opposition.

These legal worries could have been turned into a more general, more values-based discussion about the boundaries and normative implications of the “danger of crisis” narrative. By radically curtailing individual freedom, the government not only took often-disputable stands on the relative importance of human rights, but also disrespected people’s way of life in general. These regulatory steps actively prohibited most forms of leisure activities, cultural activities, and the nourishment of close human relationships. These prohibitions seemed warranted for those who accepted that surviving the COVID-19 virus should be our collective priority. But for those who either found the danger less extreme or simply prioritized sustaining their regular way of life over avoiding the virus, these restrictions expressed a deep disregard of those activities and human relationships that gave their lives value. Although these policies were meant to protect people from each other, and thus were built on the idea of mutual solidarity rather than on the paternalistic goal of “saving people from themselves,” this was no consolation for those who would have chosen their usual way of living over being protected.

As I previously noted, most of these ideas have been expressed by a handful of public intellectuals in Hungary. [Classical liberal](#) as well as leftist authors emphasized the importance of more cautious and comprehensive decision-making and a [healthy level of suspicion](#) of brand-new empirical data. Primarily leftist thinkers highlighted [the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies](#) during the Covid era, the deep alienation that it both expresses

and perpetuates, and the [devastating effects of lockdowns](#) on the working class. Legal and quasi-legal worries about the justifiability and proportionality of Covid regulations were also frequently expressed, with different political overtones.

These individual contributions did not, however, add up to a sensible counternarrative that could have articulated these concerns, which instead became expressed in vaccine hesitancy and bitter controversies offline and online. In conclusion, I would like to suggest some possible reasons why it happened thus. First and foremost, the level of political polarization in Hungary makes it very hard to create successful political narratives without political representation. Once it became clear that the established political actors and media outlets were not motivated to question the mainstream narrative, frustration found a home in the anti-establishment, embracing a mainly anti-intellectualist and apolitical opposition driven by suspicion about scientific facts. Second, this lack of reasonable criticism of Covid measures was not a local phenomenon. Public intellectuals, such as Byung Chul Han or Giorgio Agamben, who questioned the standard narrative about the pandemic and restrictive policy measures have often faced [hostility and isolation](#). No sensible counternarrative could have been borrowed and imported.

This failure has had unfortunate consequences. First, those who turned to the anti-establishment political fringe will probably stay there. Most online platforms and “news sites” that promoted Covid-skeptical content in Hungary between 2020 and 2022 provided unreliable information: fake and highly misleading scientific news and conspiracy theories. Since the restrictions have been lifted and public attention has turned from the pandemic to new topics, these platforms have mostly survived and found new targets—broadcasting, for instance, [pro-Russian propaganda](#) and news on the war in Ukraine. Their audiences have followed their lead, remaining “hooked up” to unreliable sources.

Second, the fact that anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination sentiments failed to evolve into a sensible ideology makes it incredibly hard to adequately analyze and evaluate what we have been through in the last three years. Despite our ideological and lifestyle differences, the Covid era *was* a collective experience: frustrating, painful, disturbing, threatening or simply incredibly weird. How can we create a meaningful discussion about it now that we have run out of narratives?

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE IN DYING. CULTURE WARS ABOUT COMPASSION

by Marie Nicolini

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Should the government help end the lives of people who are terminally ill? What about those who are not terminally ill? Everyone agrees that there is much at stake in this debate. Sickness can be protracted and painful: alleviating such suffering is central to medicine. Does that mean someone should be able to choose and receive a painless death when death is impending? If so, is it compassionate to extend access to those with chronic conditions whose end is not impending – or is it a compassionate response to resist expansion? These questions go to the heart of modern medicine’s goals and the government’s duties. Because suffering is central to our existence, the debate goes to the nature of our humanity.

Background

It is essential to begin with some basic background information: the terms used, a picture of where things stand globally, and the standard arguments for and against the practice. First, terminology varies greatly and can be confusing. The term “medical assistance in dying” is used here but many other terms exist, like physician-assisted suicide, aid-in-dying, physician-assisted death, death with dignity, and euthanasia. Medical assistance in dying is an umbrella term that includes physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, but these involve different methods of implementation. The former refers to the practice whereby the physician prescribes a lethal drug, and the patient delivers the lethal dose themselves. In the latter, the physician prescribes the drug and also carries out the act via an injection. Both are about providing death, upon a person’s competent request, as a response to unbearable suffering due to a serious, irremediable medical condition.

An [increasing list of countries](#) worldwide have legalized some type of assistance in dying: several states in the U.S. and Australia, Canada, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Colombia, New Zealand, Austria, Germany and Spain. Some countries have a terminal illness requirement, like the states in the [US](#) and Australia that allow for assisted suicide. Others, like Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg,

do not. [Canada](#) started with a 2016 law that limited access to those with a terminal illness (“reasonably foreseeable death”) until a court ruling ended this requirement. Canada is taking steps, which many [resist](#), to expand its law to include those with a mental illness. Many other countries are debating the issue, including [France](#), Portugal, and the UK.

There are two sides to this debate, and both have strong arguments. Arguments in favor are respect for autonomy and beneficence. Arguments against are the prohibition of killing, the incompatibility with medicine’s goals and slippery slope arguments. On the pro side, respect for autonomy refers to physicians’ duty to respect a person’s autonomous, competent wish to make decisions for themselves, including about their death. Beneficence relates to physicians’ ethical duty to alleviate suffering. Opponents argue that physicians should never end people’s lives and that, following the [Hippocratic oath](#), they pledged not to “administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so.” Slippery slope arguments say that once a form of the practice is permitted, its further expansion is inevitable. For example, the concern that allowing assisted suicide leads to allowing euthanasia, or that the reasons for providing death will expand from refractory physical pain at the end of life to other reasons or conditions. On the surface, both sides have strong, rational, human, and moving concerns.

The Professional Debate

Let’s look at where the professional debate stands on this issue. There are two main disputes: First, whether there is a relevant difference between physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia and second, whether the practice should be limited to terminal illness.

The first dispute concerns whether the difference between physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia matters, morally and for policy. Some say that there is a moral difference between performing the act of ending someone’s life as opposed to handing out a prescription. They argue that handing a prescription, but not performing the act, ensures that the decision to end one’s life is a person’s own, without any external pressure. Others argue that the difference is mainly psychological or emotional, not moral – as both practices amount to providing a lethal drug. Compassion and non-abandonment, they claim, are better served in euthanasia because the physician accompanies the patient till the end and is there to ensure no complications occur during the process.

The second debate is about the boundaries of the practice. Should they be limited to terminal illnesses or be provided for chronic disorders including mental illness – should there be a medical condition at all? Those who favor an extension argue that autonomy and suffering are the only relevant

grounds for medical assistance in dying: the source of the suffering does not matter. Those against expansion argue that suffering cannot be the only justification. It is important to note that *all* jurisdictions allowing for assistance in dying are limited to suffering that stems from a medical condition—one that cannot be relieved otherwise. Social conditions, like poverty, housing problems or discrimination, everyone agrees, should not be a basis for medical assistance in dying, but should be mitigated and social inequities addressed. Instead, the boundary debate is about what type of irremediable medical condition should be the basis for assistance in ending lives. Yet the ethical question is exactly about defining what an irremediable condition means. This appears more difficult than it may look like.

Confusion about Irremediability

“Irremediability” – the absence of remaining remedies – is a wedge in this debate. The concept matters morally because medical assistance in dying is an option of last resort. That is, death as a last option for those whose condition is *truly* irremediable. We see the importance of the concept reflected in the law. In countries like the United States or Australia, it’s built into the framework: physician-assisted suicide is limited to those who have an incurable, terminal illness. Other countries have a separate irremediability legal requirements. For example, [Canada](#) requires the presence of a “grievous and irremediable medical condition,” [Belgium](#) a “serious and incurable disorder.” This is because the practice is motivated by the relief of intractable suffering from a *medical* condition. So the concept of irremediability plays an enormous role in this debate because it grounds the practice in its medical basis.

The problem is that we need to understand what we mean by irremediable. There are several concerns. First, it is ambiguous and refers to incurability and futility. Second, and confusingly, incurability refers to a disorder, but futility does not. Instead, it refers to a treatment option. Third, we need to understand how futility applies in the context of medical assistance in dying. While irremediability is crucial and relatively clear in terminal illness, we have yet to determine how to interpret and enforce it in non-terminal illness.

First, irremediability is ambiguous: it refers to both incurability and futility. When we say a disorder is incurable, we mean the point beyond which reversal of the disease process and recovery is unlikely. We can think of terminal cancer or neurological disorders like dementia. Many common conditions are considered [incurable](#), like diabetes or coeliac disease. Futility refers to interventions that are unlikely to be beneficial to the patient. The concept originated in the 1980s in the context of decisions about foregoing life support and has largely been about end-of-life decision-making in

hospital settings. The two concepts are often used interchangeably when they are not the same.

The second layer of ambiguity is that “incurable” and “futile” refer to different *things*. Incurable relates to the medical condition – like in the phrase “incurable cancer.” Futility instead relates to a treatment intervention – “a futile intervention.” This can be confusing because we sometimes hear the term “a futile condition.” This has been the topic of longstanding disputes in bioethical debates: judgments of futility were considered within the sole purview of medical expertise – a problem that bioethicist Robert Veatch described as the [generalization of expertise](#). Furthermore, futility has often been permeated by clinicians’ value judgments about the patient’s condition. Such value judgments often are based on implicit [disability bias](#) that a life with a serious chronic condition or disability is bad or not worth living.

Finally, there is no clear understanding of how we should define “futile” interventions in the context of medical assistance in dying for chronic conditions or disabilities. Suppose a patient is at the ICU and on life support. Physicians judge that it is unlikely that they will regain consciousness. In such a case, futility decisions revolve around whether the medical team should continue life support. Suppose someone has a chronic disorder or disability – for example, diabetes or cerebral palsy. We can assume their condition is incurable in the strict medical sense. But does that mean continued intervention or support is futile? The [social model](#) of disability recognizes that what makes someone *disabled* is at least in part due to social and systemic barriers rather than the impairment itself. What counts as a futile intervention, then, clearly is beyond the purview of medical expertise.

Some might say that, at the end of the day, what matters is a person’s own quality of life judgment. A person should be able to say “enough is enough.” Yet it does not solve the question of what makes a condition *truly* irremediable. The motivation for medical assistance in dying as a last resort is that a person’s suffering be unbearable *and* their condition irremediable. Without clear standards for what “irremediable” amounts to, such judgements are prone to disability bias by health care providers, who may assume that the mere presence of a chronic disorder or disability is harmful. But, as Elizabeth [Barnes](#) and others have argued, the presence of a disorder or disability is not, per definition, a harm. Everything hinges on whether we can, as a society, define irremediability in chronic conditions in an ethical and inclusive way. Unfortunately, we are nowhere near that point.

Litmus Test

A special test case is what is an irremediable mental illness. First, because we cannot define what it means for a mental disorder to be incurable or irreversible in the first place. Second, because the boundary between mental illness and mental distress is inherently vague. On the first concern, defining irremediability in mental disorders is tricky because clinicians cannot [predict](#) whether a person will recover. More broadly, clinicians cannot use reliable physical signs, an MRI or prediction tools to know whether a mental disorder is irreversible or incurable. This is an important distinction with physical conditions. For example, we may not be able to predict how exactly diabetes will progress in a particular person. Still, clinicians have a common understanding, as a matter of science, what end-stage diabetes means and what it looks like in terms of signs. There is no such shared understanding of “end-stage” depression or PTSD.

On the second concern, the boundary between mental disorder and mental distress is vague – a long-standing dispute in psychiatry. This poses a problem for medical assistance in dying because it is precisely premised on relieving suffering that stems from a *medical* condition. For example, two American palliative care physicians ask, in the [Hastings Centre Report](#), what expanded access in the U.S. would look like: would it “erode the gains made in hospice and palliative care, making the environment riskier and more frightening for our most vulnerable patients (as the cases of [...] euthanasia for vague psychosocial distress in the Netherlands appear to suggest)?” This strikes a chord because the boundary between mental disorder and psychosocial distress is inherently vague. If we cannot define the boundary of medical assistance in dying, this poses a problem for the practice more broadly.

A Debate about our Collective Humanity

Where does this leave us? We all recognize that a compassionate response to fellow human beings’ suffering is an ethical imperative. But what constitutes a compassionate response to this suffering is what the broader debate is about. Does a government’s duty to protect individuals and mitigate social and health inequities precede that of ending people’s lives? It seems it does. Many [react](#) with indignation upon hearing that people with a mental illness, with limited access to mental health services in an already under-resourced mental health care system, are being granted medical assistance in dying in some parts of the world. Debates about expansion beyond terminal illness cannot be reduced to autonomy and suffering only: it does not work as a matter of ethics or policy. We need a genuine debate with all stakeholders, that recognizes the broader societal structures that perpetuate structural injustices at the heart of this suffering.

As someone who has worked intensively for many years on this issue, our understanding of what we can or cannot cure or remedy is the heart of the matter. Failure to ethically define irremediability poses a serious problem for the practice. Without clear standards, the disability bias trap looms large – an ethical liability for the practice. This issue transcends the divide between progressives and conservatives. It goes to the social meaning of medicine and the state's duties. Above all, it is an unprecedented challenge to the kind of society we want – and ought to – build and shape.

Marie Nicolini, MD PhD is a psychiatrist and ethicist trained in Europe and the US. A former fellow at the U.S. National Institutes of Health, she has published extensively on the issue of medical assistance in dying and has testified as an expert witness to the Canadian Parliament on this issue. She is currently a Senior Researcher at KU Leuven and holds a 3-year grant from the Belgian Research Foundation Flanders (FWO).

SURROGACY: THREE HEADLINES

by Kajsa Ekis Ekman

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In this essay, I explore how hegemonic discourses legitimize and normalize surrogacy by looking at three magazine articles: from a celebrity magazine, a business magazine, and an academic/literary magazine. All three articles present surrogacy as normal, positive, and inevitable, while obscuring the power relations inherent in the practice.

Earlier this year, *Hollywood Reporter* [carried the headline](#): “Khloe Kardashian is expecting her second baby with her ex-boyfriend Tristan Thompson via surrogate.” The little word “surrogate”—so inconspicuous—is added at the very end of the sentence, as if about to be pushed off a cliff without any damage to the main point of the headline: Woman expecting baby with man. Let us pause for a moment here, before the *Hollywood Reporter* does indeed push the word off the cliff, never to return to it, instead stating in the next sentence: “This will be the second child for Kardashian and Thompson, who plays for the NBA’s Chicago Bulls.”

The little phrase “via surrogate” would have been incomprehensible to any reader fifty years ago: some might have guessed it that it meant a type of cesarean, a machine, a hospital? Yet let us look down the abyss: it means that Khloe Kardashian is not “expecting” a baby at all. Another woman who is not named, is pregnant. *Another woman* is carrying a baby whose father is (supposedly) Thompson, *she* is changing her life for nine months, risking her fertility, her health, and even her life. In other words, she is doing what—throughout human history—would have earned her the title “mother.”

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “mother” [means](#): “The female parent of a human being; a woman in relation to a child or children to whom she has given birth.” The real mother would thus be her. Yet in this article, it is clear that she will not be awarded this title. She is not allowed to be called “mother;” she is not even to be named. She is just a tool, a “via surrogacy,” as in “I am going by car”—just the means by which Khloe, like her older sister before her, can have the cake and eat it too: becoming a mother without taking on any of the physical risks.

Isn't it so easy? You just pay, send over your genetic material, and being a mother transforms into something akin to fatherhood: no physical strain; live your life as usual while someone else is pregnant for you. Both men and women can thus be “fathers,” liberated from reproduction, while a woman from another class carries and delivers the baby. It is not the first time in history that the upper classes have used other women to do reproduction for them: just think of wet nurses, forced adoptions, Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. Yet this is the first time it has been done on such an industrial level—with multinational companies producing babies that are *meant* to be separated from their mothers—and the first time it has transformed language itself, banning the word “mother” for mothers of a certain class.

Once the baby was born, *Hollywood Reporter* even [dispensed with](#) the phrase “via surrogate”—their headline stated simply “Khloe Kardashian and Tristan Thompson Welcome Second Child.” Khloe posed in the hospital bed with the newborn, wearing white, while the surrogate was nowhere to be seen: supposedly she was told as soon as her labor was over to move over and give place to Khloe. It is interesting to note that it is still Khloe posing in bed, not Tristan, even though neither of them had a reason to be in that bed.

Pregnancy, hegemonic late capitalism will tell us, is like any job. Philosophers—especially philosophers—will dutifully twist and turn the concepts to explain that [pregnancy is a service](#), that surrogacy is not baby trade but a [donation of a limited bundle of parental rights](#), or that surrogacy [liberates women](#) by freeing the “gestator” from the burden of “motherhood.” The industry itself will tell us that surrogacy is a win-win situation: a childless woman gets a child, a poor woman gets money—or, as the surrogacy company Tammuz [says of its Ukrainian women](#), “this process enables them to secure a future for their children and their families; their motivations are primarily economic.”

Campaigns in favor of surrogacy started in the 1980s and often mimic feminist arguments, just as arguments in favor of prostitution have done since the 1970s. In the case of surrogacy, we are faced with a double message: one, destined for conservative audiences, that claims surrogacy “may shore up, rather than undermine, the traditional family,” since every couple needs a child; and one, designed for liberal audiences, that claims surrogacy is a gay rights issue and a way to subvert the link between parenthood and biology. These arguments never clash with one another, just as scissor blades never destroy each other—they work together to destroy whatever comes between them, namely any opposition to the reproductive industry.

Turning pregnancy into a job can be seen as [the ultimate form of reification](#), as Hungarian Marxist György Lukács defined it. As capitalism advances, it needs to find more areas of accumulation. Having conquered the non-capitalist as well as the socialist world, such that practically no territory on earth is exempt from capitalist logic, it now advances into public welfare and our personal sphere—realms previously not under the dominion of capital. Before, we had sex and babies without being paid for it; now, any human activity is to be bought and sold. What this means, again relying on Lukács, is that we must perceive these activities as alien to us; we must dissociate from what we sell. Thus the woman in prostitution must learn to “switch off” and not feel; thus the woman who is carrying a baby whom she will never be allowed to breastfeed, hold, name or raise must “switch off” and not get attached. And so we learn to detach from what is closest to us: our own babies, our own sensuality, ourselves—in short, what makes us human. Surrogacy and prostitution cause an immediate short circuit in theories of reification: here, the “work” does not *feel* like selling oneself—it *literally* is about selling oneself. When Marx and Lukács wrote of workers being estranged and having to seek refuge in leisure time, they referred to being estranged from the products that they produced. What we are dealing with here is being estranged from oneself and one’s own child. And for a surrogate, there is no leisure time.

This also means that we must linguistically obliterate those human words that call to mind emotional bonds and human experience, such as “mother.” She is not to be a mother, she is to be a “surrogate,” shortened from surrogate mother and shortened again to “surro”—a machine, a tool. She is not allowed to feel or to claim any human bond; none of these articles ever mention *her* feelings. Yet we do not *all* become machines, otherwise the capitalist system would not function; some have to be customers, and customers’ feelings are to be encouraged: Khloe *is* allowed the title mother, she is allowed to speak of her feelings in the media and how much she loves the child. Likewise, any buyer of surrogacy is encouraged to speak out about his or her “need” to have a child—any desire that can be translated into consumption is legitimate. This is the essence of the cruelty of the capitalist system: it allows the humanity of some to flourish and grow to unbearable heights, where any whim is a human right, at the expense of others.

Turning pregnancy into “just a job,” akin to working in a factory—what does this imply for the baby? Does it not turn the baby into a product, akin to a mobile phone? Is surrogacy, then, not baby trade? And is human trafficking not illegal, as well as [clearly unacceptable](#) under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which enshrines in article 7 “the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents,” states in article 9 that “a child shall not be separated from his or her parents... except that such

separation is necessary for the best interests of the child,” prohibits in article 11 the “illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad,” and stipulates in article 35 that “States Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form”?

Advocates of surrogacy are lobbying hard to circumvent these obstacles at discussions in the Hague, where a Hague Convention on surrogacy is being drafted by the Hague Conference on Private International Law, modeled on the Hague Convention on adoption. The “parents” are thus defined as the buyers, irrespective of whether they have provided genetic material or not. I have personally been present at these meetings, where representatives of various NGOs have, unbeknownst to their organizations, expressed views in favor of legal surrogacy that go far beyond their respective mandates. The key phrase in attempts to provide a framework for legal surrogacy is “protect the rights of children born through surrogacy,” which means full legalization of reproductive tourism. Western couples who travel abroad without permission from their state to engage in surrogacy nevertheless expect the legal documents to be in place once they return with the child. To “protect the child” means to allow the buyers to adopt the child and dispose of any rights or claims that the birth mother might have.

Let’s look at a second headline, this time from the U.S. business magazine *Quartz*: “Russia’s invasion is [damaging Ukraine’s booming surrogacy industry](#).” The article carries the following jaunty addition in capital letters on top of the headline: MAKE BABIES NOT WAR. It was published on February 25, *the day after* the invasion began. So important is the future of the surrogacy industry that it was one of the very first takes on the war this business magazine covered. Our baby factory is in danger! Our couples cannot get “their” babies out! The article sympathetically portrays Australian Glenn McGill (pseudonym) and “his wife,” who “hired a surrogate in Ukraine.” We thus have one person who apparently needs a name (the man), a nameless person who seems to be an appendage to the man (“his” wife), and yet another appendage to both, namely “the surrogate.” The hierarchy is clear.

In this article, as opposed to the aforementioned *Hollywood Reporter* article, surrogates are not invisible. This distinction is rooted in the nature of the two periodicals. A business magazine seeks to render the production process visible, as readers—presumably investors—need insights into it. For the common people who read celebrity magazines, meanwhile, the production process is generally obscured in favor of the emotional superstructure. In *Quartz*, therefore, the role of the surrogate is central: she needs to produce babies for the West, and thus she needs to be protected,

as she is carrying our babies. We are told that “BioTexCom, a fertility facility in Kyiv, even built a bomb shelter to protect its surrogates and infants.” Needless to say, this company would not have built a bomb shelter for pregnant women destined to keep their babies. In this article, it is clear that Ukraine is a top destination for surrogacy (second only to the US) due to its location—close to Western Europe—and its poverty—surrogates are cheaper in Ukraine.

Yet it is, like most business analyses, amoral: surrogacy has to go on, because it goes on. It is a way to make money by creating needs and satisfying them; people’s welfare is not our problem. Surrogacy appears in any market forecast—such as Global Market Insights (GMI)—as a good investment: profits from the surrogacy industry are [projected to increase 32%](#) by 2027, depending on what they call “the regulatory scenario”—that is, whether or not states allow it.

When I started writing on surrogacy in 2007, I was not expecting that the first countries to ban or restrict it would be destination countries, such as India, Thailand, and Nepal. I pinned greater hope on those countries that had already taken measures against prostitution, such as my own, Sweden. I do not think the surrogacy industry was expecting such tailwind either: it started, after all, as a shady, anarchic smash-and-grab type of business, going from country to country, setting up shop and moving as soon as authorities got hold. At a time when the adoption industry had been heavily scrutinized and regulated, the burgeoning surrogacy industry overlooked human rights regulations as well as the need to approve the suitability of adoptive parents: here, as long as you had money, you could buy any number of children, even if you were a single man and a convicted pedophile at that. Surrogacy is by far the easiest way for a single man to assure sole custody of a child for life, no mother in sight. What the industry is about, in effect, is not reproductive technology, but separation of mother and child.

Yet both Europe and the U.S. have failed to address the systemic exploitation, human trafficking, and cruelties that pervade surrogacy. Part of the reason for this is, I think, that the victims are women and children. And parallel to the surrogacy industry’s project of dismantling the mother, the Western world is engaged with dismantling woman as a political subject, let alone a human being. Women and children have, chivalry aside, long been the lowest priority of politics and health care alike. Now that even the women’s movement is not supposed to mention women, fighting for mothers’ rights can be a difficult task.

The third headline, “Unthinking the Family in *Full Surrogacy Now*,” appears in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, where Madeline Lane-McKinley [reviews](#)

[Sophie Lewis' book](#) *Full Surrogacy Now*. From celeb mags and business mags, we are moving into the academic realm, where the stakes are higher. One cannot simply omit the word “mother” or speak about profits; one must create a theory that says this is *good*. The article is a perfect example of how previously radical ideas of feminism or socialism have been altered to fit into a pro-capitalist, anti-woman narrative. The author of the magazine article, Lane-McKinley, is very excited about the book, as it “understands the work of baby-making precisely as work, ultimately asking of the possibility for all baby-making to be reimagined, through revolutionary comradeship, as surrogacy.” The surrogacy imagined here is “a plural womb and a world beyond proprietarian kinship and work alienation.”

This type of method is common at a stage where an industry has been given a bad rap. We see it especially in texts defending pornography, where the reader is invited to think not of the actual industry—what is bought; what is sold; who makes money and how much; the consequences in terms of mortality rates, PTSD, and violence—but of a utopian future. Pornography is thus presented as a hypothesis, idea or performance far from the actual industry.

It is interesting to see that this is now happening with surrogacy. Surrogacy used to be patriarchy's poster child. When I did TV debates in 2010, couples would bring their babies. As everyone swooned over them, the host would ask me: “Are you against the existence of this creature?” But for a decade now, it has been clear that surrogacy is exploitation. Women [have died from surrogacy](#), women have been kidnapped and [placed in baby farms](#) for surrogacy, children born through surrogacy [have begun speaking out](#) against the practice, and there are around 50 [books](#) and [films](#) critical of it (up from 2-3 in the year 2000).

Enter Surrogacy Utopia. In this article, we are to make a leap to a type of queer communist society where there is supposedly no capitalism and no money, and thus altruistic surrogacy would be practiced without families. Surrogacy is treated as something almost poetic: Noting that “all humans in history have been manufactured underwater,” Lewis postulates that “[o]ur wateriness is our surrogacy. It is the bed of our bodies' overlap and it is, not necessarily—but possibly—a source of radical kinship.”

From this hazy image, we are somehow to deduce that those who oppose surrogacy *today* are bad people. Why? Here the author resorts to the method “white women calling other white women white women,” which, one would have thought, canceled itself out as an argument. To oppose surrogacy today is apparently dangerous, as it could mean “justify[ing]

imperial wars and establish[ing] a rescue industry.”¹ Instead, Lewis thinks we should abolish *all* work.

This twist allows the author to take a second radical stance together with “Abolish the nuclear family”—which we know is so utopian it will not happen on this side of the climate crisis—while in reality arguing for what is already happening, namely taking babies from mothers. Otherwise, it would not be surrogacy, as surrogacy is having babies for someone else. Any time surrogacy happens, there is a power imbalance—even in so-called “altruistic surrogacy,” which was recently legalized by Cuba’s new family code. It is important to note that statistically, altruistic surrogacy is extremely rare. An overwhelming majority of surrogacy arrangements are compensated, whether secretly or openly. Altruistic surrogacy is mainly a myth that serves to legitimize the idea of surrogacy by speaking of sisterhood, women helping each other, mothers helping sons, and so on. Legalizing altruistic surrogacy might seem like a soft option to many, yet it is a *de facto* gateway to the legalization of commercial surrogacy without any guarantee for the woman who is cheated of her compensation. We also have to keep in mind that exploitation does not disappear just because the exploited party is not paid. I therefore prefer to speak of unpaid surrogacy, which means that a woman risks her life, alters her lifestyle for nine months, and bonds with a child only to lose it and not get anything in return.

To argue for any type of surrogacy is, in reality, to argue for the expansion of capitalism. Unfortunately, this is very common among anti-woman Anglo-Saxon socialists. For them, capitalism is bad when men are victims and good when women are: the sale of public welfare, the privatization of water or copper mines are bad; the sale of women for prostitution, pornography or surrogacy is good—or at least, fighting it must wait until we have fought everything else. What these socialists fail to understand is that these phenomena are at the *frontier* of the fight against capitalism and exploitation—they must be fought before anything else, because if we cannot fight the commodification of our bodies, our children, ourselves, why should we care about the commodification of things?

An intersectional and socialist stance on surrogacy would be crystal clear: surrogacy is mainly rich, white, Western, heterosexual, and gay couples taking babies from women in poor countries who are working-class or not even that. It is patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism at its worst. Yet by creating a word salad of concepts from socialist and feminist theory, Lewis

¹ Proponents of prostitution often use this term to refer to those NGOs or women’s organizations that try to provide alternatives for women in prostitution.

(and Lane-McKinley) somehow manages to convey that surrogacy must be accepted, otherwise one is a TERF.

It is no coincidence that defenses of surrogacy resemble defenses of prostitution: in many ways, they are two sides of the same coin. Both commodify the origins of life: sex and reproduction. Both exploit women. Both make women sacrifice two of the main joys of life—sexual pleasure and children—for the benefit of others. Where prostitution is sex without reproduction, surrogacy is reproduction without sex. By default. No john accepts a child born out of a paid sex act, just as no buyer of surrogacy would insist on having sex with the surrogate. They have to be kept separate, which is patriarchal male sexuality creating a world after its own image, where two capitalist industries have been modeled from the whore/madonna-complex: some women are working to give the male sex, others are working to give him babies, and never the twain shall meet.

VII.
CULTURE WARS IN AN
ILLIBERAL STATE:
CASE STUDY
HUNGARY

**NAVIGATING HOSTILITIES FROM ONE
DIRECTION AND PRESSURES FROM
OTHERS: EXPLORING THE REALITIES
OF FEMINIST WOMEN'S
ORGANIZATIONS IN CENTRAL-EASTERN
EUROPE THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF
HUNGARY**

by Noá Nógrádi

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The purpose of this article is to give an overview of some of the pressures, obstacles and, at times, open attacks that create a – putting it in diplomatic terms – “challenging” terrain in which feminist women’s organizations have to navigate, especially in the CEEB (Central, Eastern Europe and the Balkans) region. Such contexts (or at least the parts of it pertaining to funding and advocacy efforts in hostile states) have also been dubbed the “shrinking space” for [civil society](#) and for [women’s \(human\) rights](#). To put it less mildly, I hope to offer insight into the nearly impossible circumstances in spite of which organizations keep existing and conducting activities – albeit we also lost quite a few wonderful initiatives, professionals and volunteers during these struggles. I hope to provide an overview highlighting not only state-level actions and tendencies, which are often in focus, but a broader set of actors and processes creating these circumstances.

Nearly 10 years of involvement in the Hungarian and international women’s rights scene, – or, if it qualifies for the term, the “movement” – and prior to and somewhat overlapping with that, a 7 years’ academic focus on the subject of global violence against women inform this article. The battles involved have resulted in having to step back for a while – burnout is a common phenomenon in this environment. Another important disclaimer is that while what follows is based primarily on observations and experience in the Hungarian context, a multitude of discussions, workshops, meetings, seminars, conferences and joint research projects with women’s rights experts and activists within (and sometimes also beyond) the region have confirmed to me that we share many of the difficulties described below.

Feminist Women's Organizations

By this term, I mean organizations that work on specific issues related to women's rights (such as violence, reproductive rights, or the distribution of labor) with an understanding that the disadvantages and harms experienced by women and girls stem from patriarchy, and the hierarchical norms and roles assigned to the sexes under a patriarchal social structure, which sets men as the holders of power and women as subjugates. This set of hierarchical social norms and roles for men and women used to be called "gender" in international discourse and conventions (up until recently, when the term began to take on, or has been filled with, another meaning – more on this below).

A feminist women's organization working on the subject of violence against women, for instance, views this violence – in accordance with empirical evidence – as the outcome of gender, in the original sense of the term (thus the long and increasingly muddled term of "gender-based violence against women and girls"). That is, the violence experienced is not the outcome of the particular victim's self-identification as a woman, nor is it incidental or unrelated to the fact of her and her perpetrator's sex, the social norms and roles attached to it, and the policies and institutions whose content and operation is permeated by expectations and stereotypes regarding these norms and roles.

Feminist organizations are aware that the harms they encounter constitute a pattern; are aware of the causal chain that leads to the constant reproduction of the harms they are trying to remedy; and are aware that the long-term elimination of these harms – stopping the reproduction of these harms – would require massive structural change. This determines the approach of an organization: for instance, it informs the way they work with clients; has bearing on whom they might accept financial support from; and involves a stark awareness of limitations.

In contrast, there are organizations that do work on subjects related to women's rights, but do not frame it as such. For example, there are religious charities providing shelter for battered women that take no issue with "traditional" gender roles and offer absolution, faith, and the fulfilment of the feminine purpose as remedy to victims; and there are groups that highlight the issue of violence and harassment but make sure to note that *anyone* might be a victim/perpetrator, that this has little to do with sex or gender, and that it is equally wrong in any case. These groups might or might not be headed by or consisting exclusively of women; the difference is in the framing of the issue targeted, and the corresponding approach applied in client work, communication, and advocacy recommendations (or lack thereof). Those who frame the issue in non-feminist terms typically do

not face the same challenges as those who do – indeed, they might even receive support and encouragement from the same directions that feminist women's organizations receive hostility from. According to the feminist approach, nor are they that useful in client work or – if they engage in such discourse – in terms of their broader suggestions for reform. For feminist organizations, it is not only an ideological, but an empirical and professional conviction that understanding and addressing the structural background and causal processes of the gendered social phenomenon at hand is indispensable.

Over the decades of conducting activities in fields like sexual and reproductive health and rights; motherhood and parenting; workplace inequalities; sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women; and male-female disparity in political representation and in the higher positions of professional, business or academic life, feminist organizations regularly encounter clients who have received well-meaning but non-feminist assistance that made little long-term difference to their lives or, at times, made them even worse. This translates to further tasks: for instance, remedying damage added to original trauma by inept mental health professionals who assisted in prolonging self-blame in a rape victim, examining her individual psychological history and its role in becoming victimized, rather than assisting her in a trauma- and gender-based violence-informed way; or correcting botched strategies by lawyers unprepared to represent such clients.

Recently, a few states in the region have also set up their own version of non-feminist services and institutions – or are funding ancillary organizations (or GONGOS) that do so, as is the case also in Hungary. Here, this is a rather empty infrastructure, primarily in the form of so-called “Victim Service Centres.” These are framed in public communication as responding to the needs of victims of intimate partner violence, while their actual activity is basic information-provision for any crime victim; and they [do not provide](#) the specialized services that victims of domestic violence (and especially not ones that victims of sexual violence) would need. Governments readily point to their “efforts” to stifle criticism of widespread shortcomings to justify cynical statements. One such example is the [claim](#) that ratifying the Istanbul Convention in Hungary is unnecessary, given that the national legal and institutional infrastructure already over-performs compared to what the Convention prescribes – which anyone affected by domestic or sexual violence, or who knows someone affected, knows is simply untrue. Other examples of empty or nearly-empty storefront measures include [raising](#) social benefits for parents – but [not](#) other carers – performing full-time care for their permanently ill children (“GYOD”), to match the state-set minimum income (that is, to a

maximum net HUF [180k/month](#) (\$531 USD/month), which is lower than what could cover the most basic living expenses in Hungary); and the transfer of the abysmally low family benefits due in September at the end of August “[to ease financial burdens on families before the coming school year](#).” Meanwhile, organizations are left to try remedying whatever they can of the damage those affected face, once they realize the *cul-de-sac* nature of state services, infrastructures, mechanisms and benefits they initially believed they could rely on (cf. [institutional betrayal trauma](#)).

The Premise

Given their recognition of harms against women and girls as structurally embedded, feminist women’s organizations are aware of their efforts’ limitations. This means they operate on a somewhat desperate premise that they alone will never be able to achieve what has to be achieved for the suffering to stop on a large scale, or even to give everyone they want to help all the help that they would need. This would necessitate either a revolution, or resources only the state has:

1. large-scale short-, mid- and long-term prevention to stop reproducing the same forms of suffering, implemented in all legal and public policy areas from social to labor to education policy (which, particularly in the European context, was formerly referred to as “[gender-mainstreaming](#)”: assessing the potential effects of all policies to the advancement of equality between the sexes, integrating this approach as a priority, and adjusting all policies so that they contribute rather than be detrimental to, advancing this equality); and
2. widespread institutional infrastructure and efficient and accessible services, provided by subject-trained professionals, for those already suffering the outcomes of the status quo (be it divorced and single mothers’ impoverishment, domestic violence, rape, ob-gyn violence, or being stuck in the loop of financial distress while caring for permanently ill or disabled family members, and so on) – so long as the reproduction of the suffering is not halted.

Hence, while these organizations carry out the necessarily limited set of *activities* within their priority areas, they also tend to conduct public *communication* on systemic shortcomings as well as on their current (direct) activities; *advocacy* efforts that specify the most urgent recommendations required under (1) and (2); and of course, *fundraising* efforts to be able to cover and hopefully extend their direct and indirect activities. In the course of doing so, they have to (attempt) *cooperating* and communicating with a multitude of other actors and stakeholders: other participants of the

national and international CSO landscape, official national and supranational institutions, and naturally, their own members, activists and beneficiaries. Below, I outline some of the intricacies of these processes and areas, especially in the field of advocacy and obtaining the financial resources necessary to operate.

Advocacy on the State Level

In hostile state contexts, the fruitfulness of advocacy efforts is questionable. Consultation with organizations active in a relevant policy area is scarce and for show. Not that hardships only started with current or recent governments; long-ago (pre-2010) [battles](#) with then-powerful “left-liberal” politicians come to mind, on whether introducing the legal instrument of restraining orders can be compatible with the spirit of Hungarian law, given that such orders involve denying abuse-perpetrators access to their own private property.

Under the current government, in power since 2010, there are still so-called ministry “working group” sessions every once in a while, to which organizations are invited. At such occasions, representatives of feminist women’s organizations sit facing members of so-called fathers’ rights groups (that include perpetrators with a criminal record of abuse), who openly argue that abusive men “become the victim” if their parental entitlements to their children are in any way limited – and hence “none shall be surprised if they get angry.” Inputs in response to the governmental announcements made at sessions are then invited in writing, with extremely curt deadlines, only to be [dismissed](#) on the basis that the variety of incompatible opinions across the civil society spectrum consulted “mutually extinguish” one another. Notwithstanding the efforts invested in putting together detailed and referenced professional recommendations (despite full awareness of their futility), decision-makers’ and broader government communication cast feminist women’s organizations as unhelpful, unwilling to engage in constructive exchange, or even [ridiculous](#), malicious, (party) politically motivated, and dangerous.

Of the 13 organizations specified as “blacklisted” in [2014](#), three were feminist women’s rights organizations, and one a lesbian association, which constitutes a solid overrepresentation considering they are a tiny proportion within the overall CSO scene, even within those expressing critique of the government’s actions. In practice, this translated to no longer being invited to the ever-extending array of government-related public and private media organs, and being practically banned from all state institutions – including those that recognized the need to cooperate with or receive training from these organizations on their particular subjects of expertise. Interested professionals involved in state institutions subsequently expressed that they

might only cooperate or participate in their capacity as “private individuals.” In most EU projects, an expected (and in an ideal state context, would-be promising) element is holding stakeholder-roundtables, bringing together representatives of various relevant institutions related to the project’s subject – while in Hungary, a number of participants tend to opt out at the last minute even as “private individuals.”

It is a continuous dilemma whether feminist women’s organizations ought to participate in the charade of “consultations” or even attempt addressing government decision-makers with any analyses of and recommendations on their various and swiftly-adopted policies, while being openly attacked and routinely dismissed, and while it is fully clear that of the wide-scale changes needed in the areas of (1) and (2) described above, the state agenda goes in the polar opposite direction. To name but a few examples: rather than advancing prevention, they introduce “education for family life” state curricula (cf. “[family-mainstreaming](#)”) aiming to *entrench* the precise norms and roles that reproduce inequality and violence, and effectively ban NGOs from conducting violence-prevention in schools; and rather than enhancing women’s exit options from unhappy, unequal, exploitative or even abusive relationships, the government deliberately constructed a set of policies that incarcerate women. One of the tools involved is promoting tempting (and very needed) affordable state-supported loans that in turn tie women to their partner and make it punitively costly to divorce and/or not deliver on the promised number of children required.

International Avenues of Advocacy

So, advocacy efforts through official national channels are typically futile – how about the international arena? Many of the steps the Hungarian government has taken in recent years ignited international outrage, on closely related subjects and beyond. To name but a few instances related to this article’s subject, there was the above-mentioned [blacklisting and other open attacks](#) on civil society actors; the [proclamations](#) against the *Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*; the co-sponsoring of the [Geneva “Consensus” Declaration](#) (which declares that forcing women to carry unwanted pregnancies to term is a matter of national self-determination); the so-called “paedophile-law” or “[homophobic law](#)”; the rewritten and amended Constitution defining life [from the moment of conception](#) and setting out being “properly” gender-socialized based on “Christian values” as a [fundamental right](#) of children; the many regional “Demographic” and “Family-value” [conferences](#) organized (sometimes in cooperation with “fathers’ rights” organizations) in Budapest; and most recently, a study issued by a government entity [lamenting](#) women’s over-representation in higher education as the source of declining birth rates, and the [new requirement of forcing abortion-](#)

[seeking women to listen to embryonic and foetal life-signs](#) added to the compulsory counseling sessions for obtaining an abortion.

Unfortunately, the way the international community tends to frame these issues reinforces hostile governments' efforts in two ways:

- it reinforces the narrative that conflates women's rights movements with the LGBTQIA movement and their definitions of [gender](#) (and gender identity); and
- it reinforces the narrative that the international community (primarily the EU/"Brussels") is attempting to encroach upon national [sovereignty](#) by pushing agendas incongruent with the particular nation's own culture and visions, an attack against which the reigning government is proudly protecting the country and its citizens.

Recently, one of the primary narratives with which women's rights are dismissed is lumping the subject together with the LGBTQIA and gender-identity movement. Rather than plainly dismissing the actual subject at hand, it is certainly easier to argue against steps to protect victims of gender-based violence against women by saying that this would involve the indoctrination of children to take sex-change hormones. International actors' tendency to also lump these subjects together reinforces this narrative, ignoring both the counterproductive effects of this, and the discrepancies between the gender-definitions and the particular demands made by feminists on one hand, and the LGBTQIA-movement on the other, which would be uncomfortable and image-wise risky to admit and address.

Consequently, international action in this area tends to consist in communicative gestures, virtue-signaling the speaker's own values and progressiveness to the rest of the audience, rather than actually supporting the efforts of those within the criticized country and stuck in a windmill-fight with the regime. Feminist women's organizations try to keep their focus on their original subjects and areas of activity, but this is made increasingly difficult by the international community and its various types of agents adopting, and often expecting local organizations to also adopt a framing in which the subjects of gender inequality (inequality between the sexes) and gender identity seem inextricable.

Asking local and even regional umbrella organizations for their input typically consists, both on the EU and the wider international level, in making them fill out lengthy questionnaires and consultations and submitting summary documents to a determined set of questions (rather

than asking to highlight what *they* deem most relevant). This often feels like a tick-box extra-burden exercise the questioner can then refer to as “having consulted a great number of organizations,” which is supposed to increase the legitimacy of whatever will be said in reference to it, in a similar fashion as it occurs on the state level. While the actual content of what has been said does not translate to any action, the tendency is to hand-pick some general points that suit the broad statements the questioner had wanted to say in the first place. It would be great if these inputs received more in-depth consideration and if questions were more open to allow room for what local organizations themselves find important to highlight.

Counterproductive and Women-Blind Responses

Furthermore, as the policy areas of women’s and LGBTQIA rights, gender-based oppression of women and gender identity, are often lumped together automatically, given that LGBTQIA rights have gained primary focus in the last decade in social justice-related international discourse and media, the latter tends to be the highlighted area of concern. Few have noticed the grave implications pertaining to women’s and girls’ rights and the equality of the sexes in several of the oft-criticized steps taken by the Hungarian government. For example, amendments to the Constitution (now called the *Fundamental Law of Hungary*) stating that “the mother is a woman and the father is a man” and that “Hungary defends children’s rights to an identity in accordance with their birth sex, and ensures their education to be in accordance with our nation’s constitutional identity and values based on our Christian culture” has been read exclusively as an attack against same-sex couples’ parenting and against transitioning.

While I would not debate that the message on this front is certainly there, one also ought to [read this with a women’s rights perspective in mind](#), and be able to surmise how well it fits with the agenda of indoctrinating children to the hierarchical norms and roles considered appropriate to their sex – now not only in the state curriculum, but enshrined in the Constitution as a fundamental right. One should also be wary of the above-mentioned amendments’ legitimate reading as “women *ought to* become mothers and men *ought to* become fathers,” with all the natalist and “traditional family values” connotations attached – which is also in accordance with the wide array of tangible policies [detrimental](#) to the equality between the sexes that this government has implemented. Women’s organizations have fought very long against the stereotypical expectations and thinking that prescribe that one’s sex play a crucial part of their personal identity or opportunities in life: indeed, feminists would prefer if a person’s sex had as little bearing as possible on how they are educated as children and how they develop as a person. This used to be called gender-*abolitionism* (the elimination of the social norms and roles attached to sex, so that individuals can develop

without sexist stereotypes, pressures and expectations), so it is all the stranger in current times when feminists are urged to join forces “in defense of gender” in the face of what are termed conservative/governmental “anti-gender” tendencies, which aim to uphold the restrictive and hierarchical norms and roles attached to the sexes that used to be called, precisely, gender.

Similarly, in spite of a variety of severe consequences, there has been little discussion [from the perspective of women’s and girls’ rights](#) of the content and practical implications of the law commonly referred to as “homophobic law.” First and foremost, the purported aim of the law was to protect children from sexual abuse and prosecute its perpetrators more strictly, but it is [unfit](#) to actually protect children. And second, it limits *any* educational program that includes sex- and sexual equality-related content – including violence-prevention classes, sexual education, or classes on the subject of equality between girls and boys – that would be crucial to actually protecting children. Meanwhile, school-aged girls are increasingly victimized both by adult men (for which they are suitably [pre-groomed](#) by pornography and a pornified popular culture, whose effects cannot be addressed if subjects related to sexuality are banned from schools), and also by their own peers in the form of sexualized bullying, sexual violence, and the (also porn-informed) violence – from slapping to aggressive anal penetration to choking – the “enjoyment” of which is now considered a commonplace expectation in everyday teen sexuality. Awareness-raising classes that would support teenagers in recognizing early warning signs and understanding their rights and options in case they are targeted or victimized by either a peer or an adult are as affected by this law as contents on non-heterosexual orientations.

Exemplifying the blindness to women’s rights complemented by an excessive focus on LGBTQIA concerns, a recent visit by an international official on freedom of speech and information also comes to mind. The official’s office has contacted a women’s rights organization and was scheduled for a short visit after all other subject consultations, with an air of getting it over with. Questions on the meeting concerned LGBTQIA rights and the above readings of recent measures. It seemed as though the idea that women’s rights – in their own right – might have something to do with freedom of speech and information seemed rather new to the official. The official listened with increasing interest to the list of many issues at this intersection, such as the state-prescribed manipulative misinformation delivered on compulsory counseling sessions prior to abortion, the purposely grey area of whether providing information on abortion constitutes a crime, the limitations imposed on sharing information about safe sex and violence-prevention (a consequence of the “homophobic

law”), and the successful defamation suits by abuse-perpetrators that courts schedule prior to the criminal proceedings that would prove the perpetrator’s guilt – which is effectively preventing victims of various forms of violence against women from speaking up. And yet, the official went on to report that there are issues with repressing the freedom of press, civil society, and with the negative portrayal of the LGBTQIA community in Hungary. Apparently, misogynist and sexist speech, the normalization of violence against women and of women’s subordination, and the silencing of women and girls, commonplace in Hungarian politics, media, law and education were still not deemed problematic enough to [mention](#) alongside these concerns, in spite of the fact that their effects on girls and women are as grave as that of homophobic/transphobic speech might be on members of the LGBTQIA community. It is easy to imagine how discouraging it can be for women’s rights activists that even international fact finders are willing to render violations of women’s rights invisible. It often seems as though women’s rights pick the shorter straw from the “women and LGBT” lump-box of interest for the latter to be made visible; as if the two could not be made visible at the same time and with the same weight.

Thus, international actors’ expressions of outrage and calls for order contribute to the conflation of issues in confirmation of deliberate governmental misframings, and overfocus on the hot topic of LGBTQIA-aspects while sometimes fully ignoring women’s rights aspects and the harms befalling women and girls. This, combined with the tone and mode of how criticism is delivered – which is often preachy and involves the repetition of concepts and buzz-words, rather than articulating and listing tangible issues, facts and specific rights-violations – lends itself easily to support governmental narratives about international actors’ attempts to coerce Hungary to adopt un-Hungarian values. Focusing on women’s rights and the tangible issues related would not be so easily exploited to serve this narrative – fewer Hungarians would buy into the idea that “Brussels” is trying to damage the Hungarian national values of wife-beating, or teen-girl rapes, for instance.

Lack of International Consensus

Another issue with international avenues of advocacy is that actors seem not to have caught up to the fact that, for governments hostile to the rights and values from which they openly and pointedly diverge, being reprimanded for this is a point of pride, rather than one of [shame](#). Little effect may be expected of this other than proclamations being used as proof of having to defend the country against aggressive external pressures. What local organizers have long recognized, the international community seems not to have; and is keeping with diplomatic practices and review-, reporting- and recommendation-processes that may have been considered fruitful in

the optimistic 1990s, but now constitute little more than a charade similar to what happens on national advocacy levels. These practices take as a premise the existence of international or European consensus and cooperation on a variety of subjects, rights and values that is plainly not there – whatever declarations, directives or charters may have been signed, supposedly ratified and implemented (tying in with broader issues that stretch beyond the focus of this piece).

If states had only achieved adherence, or at least a closer convergence, in the past 30+ years just to the [CEDAW](#) Convention and [protocols](#) (of 1979, ratified in Hungary in [1982](#)) and of the [DEVAV](#) Declaration (of 1993), it would already have made and would still make an enormous difference. But it seems that in terms of women's rights, equality between the sexes and cooperation with civil society actors and experts on the subject, the idea of an internationally agreed upon system of shared bases and goals, set in documents in reference to which states hold each other accountable is, at this point, illusory. In view of this, it is all the more surprising when supranational bodies not only reference international documents that were at least at some point in history officially accepted by each state party to them, but are attempting to establish further ones. If a party clearly ignores a contract and eschews accountability mechanisms related to it, how can one expect the same party to authentically accede to additional obligations, which are even more demanding or more divergent from their own agenda, or aim to strengthen those accountability mechanisms?

Pretense of Establishing Further Consensus

This leads to an additional issue with international avenues of advocacy that may, in a somewhat more ideal context, be of interest to women's organizations: the upholding of existing international contracts not only in their own country, but also in others; the amendment of already established international norms; and the establishment of new ones.

In the past decade, a variety of reframing- and policy-trends have gained traction in more powerful European countries, that are of particular relevance to CEEB countries, to feminist women's organizations, women and girls from those countries, both directly and indirectly. Given the significant influence of the states adopting these approaches and their congruence with and support by a variety of financially and communicatively powerful market actors, these have swiftly become mainstream in the European and broader international arena. To name but three, starkly relevant areas of concern:

1. The reframing of prostitution as sex work and the corresponding adoption of policies facilitating the sex trade, which results in an

increasing number of women and girls from [peripheral](#) countries trafficked to the West for sexual abuse and exploitation, and broadens the space to develop markets exploiting them in [online](#) branches of the sex trade within their countries of origin;

2. The reframing of [abortion](#) as a matter of genderless/sexless individual liberty (cf. the expression “[pregnant person](#)”) rather than a crucial matter of women’s rights – as the exploitation of women’s reproductive capacity and the vulnerabilities due to this capacity, in which patriarchy is rooted – making it difficult to formulate and properly contextualize the struggles in countries that are building towards, or have effectively realized, instituting state rights to force women and girls to carry unwanted pregnancies to term; and
3. The [muddling](#) of the meaning of gender and sex in policy documents, retrospectively as well as in new policy-making discourses and efforts, both nationally and internationally, threatening to overwrite protections for women as a social group with identity-based and self-identification focused policies.

Meanwhile, we are also witnessing the dismantling and crumbling of welfare state services across Europe, and the ensuing, globally prevalent [care crisis](#), especially in elderly care in view of the ageing population. This results either in women taking up the slack of care, unpaid or compensated by miserably small state benefits, for their family members and extended family members; or if the family can afford it, in imported, undocumented cheap at-home care labor, performed in each country by women from comparatively poorer countries/regions (Transylvanian and Ukrainian women in Budapest, and Hungarian women in Germany and the UK, for instance). This dismantlement *does* seem to constitute an international consensus, and it implicitly counts on the exploitability of women’s un- and underpaid labor in providing care, somewhat controlling the damage so that the consequence of cuts and under-fundedness of the care infrastructures are less visible. And, simply put, women are too busy with it all to have the energy to protest: the technique of “tiring out” works in the so-called private and the public realms alike. The added burdens, of course, also result in increased [vulnerability](#) and often dependent economic situations, and the strengthening of inequality between the sexes. Considering that this is a knowable phenomenon and tendency, the authenticity of proclamations and claims to advance equality by the same decision-makers who create the context of “outsourcing” state care back to the private and the grey economy, becomes questionable.

In view of these trends, not only are already agreed-upon norms not upheld (in habitually reprimand-issuing and -receiving states alike) and unwilling states' accountability lacking, there are also new directions internationally, reinterpreting and amending existing (supposed) norms, filling them with added or different meanings and content. Furthermore, there are calls for a broad implementation of additional norms that, in the view of many women's organizations (in the CEEB region and beyond), are plainly incompatible with a feminist, structuralist rather than individualist approach. A blissful ignorance not only of differences in the precise definition of concepts such as gender (definitions are of high relevance in legal- and policy texts, not only in technical or theoretical, but also in practical terms), but also of potential and existing clashes and [conflicts](#) between different interests, claims to rights and advocacy goals, seems to prevail – as though all rights, claims and goals were compatible and even mutually strengthening, if only we tried hard enough. (Note that there are contentions even *between* and *within* the minorities the LGBTQIA movement supposedly represents, with some gay, lesbian and bisexual [groups](#) and individuals [arguing](#) that there is an unwarranted conflation of divergent or conflicting principles, interests and aims between the groups denoted under the umbrella, and critiquing the dominant focus on transgenderism and identity.)

While there is no consensus on the new subjects and directions either, there is a pretense of one as per mainstream dictate. Thus, women's organizations are expected – lest they be labeled retrograde and lose their credibility and consideration as legitimate speakers on the matters within their area of expertise, and lose funding opportunities for the essential services they provide and the activities they carry out in spite of a powerful counter-current within their local contexts – to wholeheartedly embrace these trends or stay politely silent about their concerns. Staying politely silent is an expectation feminist women's organizations are deeply familiar with, but are not too fond of; it is all the more frustrating that this is required in order not to be banished to an even less favorable position than the current sideline in the international arena, a sacrifice that has to be made to keep the opportunity of at least highlighting the concerns still speakable and nameable. Yet highlighting the structural causes and reproduction of women's and girls' suffering, inherent in a feminist approach, is becoming increasingly impossible with the individualized conception of gender and related advocacy efforts that have gained broad traction in international discourse.

Fundraising – at the State and European Level

Needless to say, in hostile states, feminist women's organizations receive little to zero funding from state sources: this goes to the ancillary

organizations/GONGOs mentioned above. Often, the latter are swiftly erected following an influx of funding to the state (from EU sources) for the particular issue at hand, as was the [case](#) in Hungary with the so-called “Family Friendly Country Nonprofit Ltd,” formerly (until 2016) known as “Hungarian Sailing Sport Nonprofit Ltd,” which ingested an impressive 6.2 billion Hungarian Forints (over \$18 million USD) of support the year after it gained its new name and purpose, and is since the main ancillary for domestic violence-related activities and pseudo-activities. As is well known, states hostile to NGOs unrelated to the government will attempt to also cut channels to other sources of funding for these organizations. In the Hungarian case, this primarily meant the laws and extensive discrediting campaigns targeting “foreign-funded” organizations, and the pestering of organizations participating in the EEA/Norway grants scheme, until eventually – unable to force donors into accepting the state’s having a say in which organization will distribute the 4 billion Forints’ (\$11.8 million USD) worth of sub-grants dedicated to NGOs – disallowing these funds to reach Hungary, even if it meant [losing out](#) on 73 billion Forints (\$215 million USD) dedicated directly to the state.

That leaves the other main international grant-making body, the EU/EC, as a potential source for obtaining medium-size or larger grants. EU projects, as anyone ever having participated in one could tell, are extremely bureaucratic and admin-heavy. They are also typically short-term (1.5-2 years), and expect narrow foci. This means that they are not suitable for supporting the operation or development of organizations’ long-term core activities and basic costs, and sometimes add unnecessary burdens to the workload of already overstretched teams. Nonetheless, they often target areas of high relevance to organizations’ activities and missions, and since there is often no other option in sight for survival, organizations do attempt to obtain European grants.

Then comes the next hoop: securing state partners. Even though this condition was somewhat eased in recent years, still, every EU project needs to show that it has consulted with relevant official and institutional stakeholders and made successful advocacy efforts. As explained in the above section on advocacy, this is a practically undeliverable deliverable in hostile states – which are also precisely those in which NGOs are in most need of external funding coming directly from the Commission. Thus, while we have European actors speaking up against the limitations and harassment imposed upon NGO actors in these states, and often mention them as the champions of the shared values missing from the particular state’s hostile government, and while these actors also experience first-hand the futility of their own attempts of issuing calls and recommendations to

those states, they simultaneously expect fruitful cooperation with those governments on part of NGOs, should they receive a grant.

A similar assumption of inexistent consensus seems to be demonstrated here as described in the case of advocacy. While a few decades ago, the merry cooperation of the civil sector and its experts with state institutions may have been a reasonable idea, enough time has passed to recognize that in the case of a few “renitent” states, this is not viable, nor can be expected. If the European infrastructure wished to effectively aid the advancement of women’s rights, or Roma rights, or refugees’ rights for that matter, in states that disapprove of advancing these rights, it ought to give direct and long-term core funding to struggling organizations rather than expecting lengthy reports after short projects, anxiously explaining why the particular advocacy efforts have failed to achieve a large impact.

Fundraising – the International Level

Internationally, the main sources of funding are large and typically U.S.-based private foundations and UN agencies, and large sub-grantor organizations of these. These donors also each come with their own framings and priorities. This is justifiable to some degree – they want to support projects and organizations that square with their missions and purposes. However, save for a very few exceptions (I know of only two currently active in the CEEB region: a private foundation based in the UK, and the CSR program of a large Nordic company that seems to take CSR quite seriously), donors are not too interested in the priorities and necessary activities identified in particular subject areas by local organizations themselves. Instead, they tend to push their own framings, priorities and vocabularies onto local organizations, or even go as far as to treat them practically as subcontractors who will carry out the grantor’s predetermined set of activities applying its predetermined approaches – never mind organizations’ agency and their naturally more extensive knowledge of the local context, the most crucial gaps to fill, and potentially promising directions.

In the course of application processes, while emphasizing partnership and – given the unequal financial relations, the by-definition impossible – lack of hierarchical relations on which they pride themselves, such donors often seem to feel like “they know better”; as though they set out to educate local organizations with an arrogance reminiscent of well-meaning neo-colonialists, enlightening the backward and pitiable on what their issues are and what they ought to do about it. Given that there is not much other choice to secure funding, organizations’ activists and experts with decades of knowledge and experience, much better qualified than the grantor to assess what projects and activities are most needed and promising in their

own context, politely nod and tolerate this, and then go on trying to turn whatever has been set into something actually useful during implementation (insofar as they managed to jump all the framing and administrative hoops the grantor has established). One stark example of this are U.S.-based donors pushing strategic litigation as a wonderful tool to achieve legal change – also in countries with civil law systems where court decisions are then *not* incorporated as a precedent into the body of law, and thus where donor insistence on litigation is then made useful as an opportunity to represent particularly vulnerable or resourceless clients, without much further consequence.

From the scope and language of calls for proposals and funding priorities laid out by donors, organizations can surmise what the current donor-trend is, to which they have to attempt tailoring their plans and activities. One of the prominent donor-trends in the last decade was (re)branding: improving the PR and online visibility of organizations, become visually more appealing and attractive to the mainstream public, with the hope that this would also result in increasing the proportion of individual microdonations in organizations' overall income. During this trend, there was virtually no source of support for direct service activities, so these were carried out mainly on a voluntary basis and with lesser plannability, while funding traveled forward to design, IT and PR subcontractors. Subsequently – and mainly in parallel with events in the U.S. (such as the BLM movement and the Women's March) and their strong representations in popular culture – activism, direct service and the grassroots image, became cool again. Suddenly, donors expected organizations to show soaring numbers of those supported by their direct services, hitherto run primarily on volunteer-juice, and swift and significant improvements to these. (I am aware of [arguments](#) claiming that this is the way to go – that in order to be true movements, organizations should refuse to formalize and members/participants should provide direct help and work for social change unpaid. However, I reject the familiar expectation that women should carry significant workloads with no financial compensation, and assert instead that financial resources are indeed needed for any initiative to operate, let alone to improve.)

Meanwhile, donors also expect organizations to demonstrate their legitimacy and credibility by showing advocacy achievements, which is complicated by the various obstacles explained above. So, the predictably fruitless advocacy efforts cannot be forgone also because organizations ought to show that at the very least, they tried.

Receiving funding is largely dependent on how adept an organization is at successfully contorting its priorities and planned activities into the language and framing of the particular donor and the call for proposals applied to –

a truism to which any proposal-writer can attest. Yet in the case of feminist women's organizations, this has recently come to involve an added twist due to the international policy- and (re)framing-trends outlined above. First of all, if the donor lists a lumped-together priority area along the lines of "women and girls/women's rights/gender equality and LGBTQIA community/rights," one can be fairly sure that projects/organizations with a focus on the latter will take precedence. Second, since donors are highly trend-sensitive, the expectations present in the international advocacy arena are also present in the fundraising arena. This means, for instance, that one has to be careful about revealing critical views of the sex trade as an industry rooted in patriarchy and their understanding of prostitution as a form of male violence against women, lest they risk losing out on funding for, say, a sexual education project. Answering questions on "What gender-definition does the organization work with?" is becoming increasingly unavoidable, and one should consider themselves lucky if definitions based on the [CEDAW Convention](#) and the [DEVAW Declaration](#) suffice for the potential donor.

There is also an increasing expectation to frame ongoing and planned efforts related to reproductive rights in sexless/genderless terms, as though these were *not* women's rights issues; and to integrate a nod towards trends by adding to every proposal that of course, trans women and girls, who are the most marginalized among all, will receive special attention throughout the course of the project, never mind if very few or none of them are facing the particular issues the given project or the organization focuses on. This, I feel the need to add, is not to say that trans people should not receive services or support; it is to say that the needs are not the same (which I doubt anyone with an intersectional approach could question, if they hope to remain consistent) and that women's organizations are often unreasonably expected to integrate addressing needs and issues that are not within their focal activities, existing methodologies and service areas.

The Ukraine Turn

The most recent example of questionable donor practices loading sudden expectations and turns on local organizations in the region relates to Russia's invasion of the Ukraine. The civil society sector and its members themselves were highly motivated to "do something" to help those fleeing Ukraine; but keeping pre-existing, core missions and activities while taking up a load of services to provide for refugees became a hard act to balance. Some organizations, like [Federa](#) in Poland, almost entirely refocused their activities on helping Ukrainian refugees; most have tried and are trying to maintain their already capacity-stretched and un(der)funded original activities while also broadening their set of activities to incorporate some services for Ukrainian refugees; and some panicked with the predicted

added workload and tried to stay out of this activity area as much as possible.

The war has brought an unprecedented influx of UN agency interest and UN and other funding into countries sharing borders with Ukraine. Going into [details](#) on how both state and UN agency responses to this refugee crisis were and are botched, with their intransparent and bureaucratized systems and lack of tangible infrastructures and adequate, context-informed direct services, would require an article of its own. What needs to be noted here is that the international donor community and supra-governmental agencies suddenly expected organizations in the region to satisfy needs that did not seem to be of interest when they affected “only” the local women of that country, and that they failed to offer support creating services for. In spite of many and increasingly desperate articulations in the past decade of significant struggles that organizations in the region face, international organizations and donors arriving because of the war expected to encounter stable and sound organizations with a perfectly running infrastructure, complementing the presumably solid state infrastructure, which could now be swiftly and easily extended to provide for refugees as well. Many seemed surprised to learn, through this crisis, the abysmal state of healthcare, housing, reproductive care and rights, and violence-response services in refugee-recipient border-countries. Surprise and actual listening was the better reaction – eye-rolling over how much CEEB grassroots organizations and local experts tend to moan and complain about these lacks was the other prevalent one. During this crisis, more than ever before, organizations have experienced what it is to be considered inferior subcontractors that should shut up, take the money, and make it work.

Finally, donors with less arrogant attitudes seemed to have understood how unrealistic it is to expect generating a perfectly running set of services in a hostile and under-equipped state environment, where many local women and girls are also experiencing rights violations and extremely vulnerable and destitute conditions, and where organizations were already struggling to fill at least some gaps to remedy this, and have come to appreciate what the added load means to these organizations. Such donors are currently attempting to combine providing funding for Ukraine-related services with core organizational support. In practical terms, this means that organizations still have to frame their activity plans as to how it will benefit refugees, but they are allowed to reference their own basic operation as a prerequisite for realizing this goal.

Resulting Issues

The above challenges in securing funding for basic operation and core activities, and the increasingly unrealistic hope of effecting relevant, tangible

and useful changes on the advocacy/institutional level add up to a sense of instability, tension, and lack of plannability for organizations. It also forces them to be stuck in “responsive mode,” rushing from turn to turn dictated by national and international actors with political and/or financial power, to address emerging policies and trends, while attempting to remedy the real-life consequences of patriarchy on women’s and girls’ lives in a band-aid fashion – rather than having the energy, time, space and resources to develop and carry out proactive strategies.

Meanwhile, there are further, similarly rocky terrains to navigate with other movements and organizations, the media and market actors, and individuals involved with or being assisted by the organization. The prior entails assumptions and expectations demonstrated in international advocacy, especially in terms of the understanding of “gender,” where women’s organizations are expected to recognize the shared goal and common good with some actors that often promote or celebrate the exact sexist stereotypes feminists are fighting against. Non-state market actors – especially the porn industry, related tech and IT-industry, and the advertising and media industry – are just as responsible as states in creating an environment where the objectification of and violence against women and girls are increasingly normalized; it will never be possible to conduct enough sexual and relationship education classes as to counterbalance the damage they make. An emptied-out version of “feminism” has been popularised, according to which women and girls choosing to subject themselves to violence during sex is a way of personal liberation. Some beneficiaries express disappointment and anger, not (just) at the state, but (also) at organizations for not having more capacity and services to cover all their (fully justified and legitimate) needs. And finally, organizations that also provide direct activities for and assistance to women and girls try to create a balance between activism and professionalism, mobilization to advance broader change and service-provision, recruiting and involving activists and volunteers and providing high-standard specialized services by trained and paid employees (cf. [NGOization](#); [the NGOization of resistance](#)) – which also causes internal tension when deciding priorities and plans, especially considering the scarcity of financial resources and human capacity.

So to my sisters active on the frontlines, I can only wish strength, and good luck.

“THE VOICE OF THE UNHEARD NATION”: CULTURE WAR IN THE FIELD OF POPULAR MUSIC IN HUNGARY

by Ágnes Patakfalvi-Czirják

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The interpretation of the Orbán regime has become an important topic in the international press and academic literature over the past decade as a contemporary example of the dismantling of democracy and the liberal democratic establishment. There are some elements that bind these interpretations together: the large-scale re-centralization in many areas, from education to public administration and law; the distortion of Hungarian media relations, including the creation of a clear governmental media dominance; systemic corruption; and state-level anti-immigration and racist discourses and acts.

These structural changes are what the ruling Fidesz party has been introducing during the last decade and the success of this approach to political communication have served as a ground for Fidesz’ establishment of its hegemony in the fields of politics, society, and culture too. A further question is how Fidesz’ hegemony has been manifested in the consumption of culture and everyday situations. To understand the process locally, it is essential to look at how the people accept and take political discourses for granted, how the culture war of the regime against “liberal” and “Western” values unfolds at the everyday level. Besides many other sites of everyday life, popular music can play a part in the facilitating of the process of hegemony-building.

[Some scholars](#) have pointed out that music as a practice and as performance has the power to create, or to strengthen [social movements](#). It can articulate and popularize [political demands](#), and mobilize [emotions](#). Other researchers emphasize that the boundaries between popular culture and politics are becoming blurry structurally and discursively, with political debates as source of entertainment and spectacle. The media’s domination of how politics is portrayed is also important, with politicians being placed on the same level with film and television [actors](#); popular musicians have been assuming the roles of political advocates, with professional politicians performing as celebrities. [Péter Csigó](#) highlights how politicians’ struggle for popularity, which takes place in a media-dominated environment, is

mobilized and kept in constant campaign mode through stereotypes about “the people,” the people’s needs, and general prejudices about [taste of “the people.”](#) This constant campaign is supported by a constant speculation of think tanks, political PR specialists, and politicians regarding the public’s social demands and preferences with the same logic as in the case of pop culture.

Pop culture and especially pop music play an important role in the formation and reproduction of national identity. They contribute to the dissemination of populist messages and provide interpretations and explications on culture wars led by populist politicians. For example, the extensive [national rock music networks](#) of the 2000s played an undeniable role in the interweaving of radical right-wing subcultures and the radical-right party known as Jobbik in Hungary. The concerts of national rock bands not only provided a musical experience, but also an opportunity for performances of political affiliation and nationhood. Political content was linked to a particular mode of expressing and worldview, an attitude, and the unifying power of participation.

It’s small wonder that since 2010 Fidesz’ cultural hegemony has been built in part on the co-optation and embracing of radical right-wing bands, on the “[popification](#)” of memory politics and political campaigns, and on the expansion of funding for and control over pop music. At the same time, the Hungarian case is also important in that it points to the [class contexts of hegemonic construction](#), and to the ways in which cultural forms, supported content, and political-memory interpretations become legitimated and mainstreamed through subsidy policies, and how these are linked to the representation of the middle class preferred by the party in power. In this sense, the themes discussed below, such as national belonging and solidarity, Christian values, and militarism, are intertwined with elements of taste and style to reinforce the rhetoric of populist politics, and also to underpin the legitimate taste of the middle class as conceived of by the Fidesz government.

Here I examine examples of popular music that help spread the ideological messages of Fidesz’ culture war and make these accessible for different audiences. In cooperation with Emília Barna, we began [our research](#) examining the role of popular music in the spread and normalization of populism and populist discourses in Hungary. Since 2019, we have been looking for answers to questions such as: How are populism and popular music connected? How does popular music facilitate the normalization and mainstreaming of populism? What is it, specifically, about popular music – why is it a successful tool when used in social and political contexts?

We started from the premise that music can play a part in the solidifying of political power through its ability to address social groups through processes of identification and its ability to create a feeling of community. The research draws on participant observation at relevant political and music events, [musicological group analysis](#), and analysis of political and music-industry opportunity structures.

We identified those mainstream Hungarian bands and music styles that are highly popular on music stations and have the biggest live shows in Hungary and take active role in the hegemony building, such as those rock bands and performers established during the Communist and post-regime-change eras, radical right-wing subcultures, and politically active mainstream performers. Certain types of events stand out as the most important fields where music plays an important role in facilitating the hegemony and mainstreaming political messages. Firstly, there are free events financed by local councils, many of which are village fairs or festivals, and we shall include local or gastronomic festivals in the list. These events have the aim of strengthening local identity and facilitating community-building. Funding policy has a role in selecting which local councils are able to organize festivals, in the selection of the invited bands or artists, thus providing power to the government to influence local identity-building in a way that incorporates in it its own identity-policy projects.

Culture war as symbolic self-defense

Over the past 12 years, the diverse directions taken by Fidesz' cultural struggle have gradually crystallized, and it has become clear that it has links to a brand of radical right-wing identity politics that is found elsewhere around the world as well. The conservative opportunism and ideological omnivorousness of the early 2010s has been transformed into an established hegemonic party that problematizes the same social issues and identity-politics topics as the far-right and radical right-wing parties and organizations in the U.S. or in Western European countries. Over time, and with the expansion of [state campaigns and propagated discourses of xenophobia](#) (that is, the idea of ["race mixing"](#) as an external threat), the "defense" of Christian values, the sexist, misogynist remarks and practices and the spread and incorporation of heteronormative family images into public policies, became banal in the political communication and in everyday life.

In Hungary, the hegemonic power presents the concept of culture war as political action undertaken by the Orbán government as a legitimate means of defending national pride, national values, and community. Thus, for the Fidesz party's [ideologists](#), it is not an analytical or descriptive concept. This is one of the areas of the government's ideology where the effort to make

the divergent, even contradictory discourses appear unified and thoughtful is most evident. Here, the problem of the vulnerability of underfinanced cultural institutions and their exposure to the market, the critique of globalization and consumerism, meets paternalistic and nationalist conceptions of culture and is channeled into the political system. Policies divide cultural institutions, loyal local councils, and their employees into those who deserve state funds and those who do not.

In the culture war, the two groups—the “useful” and “the useless” (or “harmful to the nation”—are confronting each other, with the state acting as a clientelistic and paternalistic protector to maintain these boundaries in its policy of distributing financial support and honor. Rogers Brubaker emphasizes that populist demands are located at the intersection of [the politics of inequality and identity politics](#), where the question of who deserves, or “who gets what” becomes constitutively entwined with “who is what.” For this reason, the discourses of the culture war and distribution of resources, opportunities, and honor become linked in the articulation of identity and loyalty to the governing party.

The culture war does not only affect the distribution of symbolic signs and images associated with the nation, but also influences the institutions and infrastructure of the cultural sphere. Political communication proclaiming legitimate self-defense could not be successful if cultural institutions and cultural funding did not reflect or align with it, and if it did not also affect people’s everyday lives, cultural consumption, and opportunities. One of the functions of the struggle for and through culture, in accordance with the functioning of the populist system, is to define, name, and teach society about the external and internal forces that are harmful to the nation.

Since 2010, the forms of commemorations and national holidays have also changed dramatically, becoming enriched with popular music elements. To attract larger crowds and to disseminate knowledge widely in line with the government’s identity policy, several attempts have been made to [write new pop music songs](#), [patriotic songs](#), and [rock operas](#). Although in most cases these productions did not really live up to expectations and did not become wildly popular, they did reach a wide range of audiences on specific occasions. The growing power of the governing party, and at the same time the financial problems of the music market and the vulnerability of [music industry workers](#), became more visible during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The incorporation of the live music industry into the hegemonic structure of Fidesz has accelerated significantly. The dependence on cultural funding not only increased ideological control but also the maintenance of infrastructure and facilities. This trend became more evident during the

2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, when several artists expressed their open commitment to the government at [various events](#) (such as at the Peace March in 2022, attended by the Roma reality show star [Győző Gáspár](#); or by rock musicians like Attila Pataky and Feró Nagy), or published joint photos with politicians in the press and social media (for example the Roma musician [Kis Grofó](#), or the [pop star Ákos Kovács](#)), and these possibly increased political mobilization. The government’s image of success was also built on some international events like the [World Eucharistic Congress](#) in 2021 or the [World Water Championships](#) in 2022. It highlighted the government’s strategy on how to gain international recognition and how to integrate Hungary into the global cultural wars—in these cases as a modern champion of Christianity and small but successful player in the world of sports. The chosen musicians got the opportunity to take part in such events as performers and it could help them to make up for their lost income during the pandemic lockdowns.

As can be seen from this overview, the culture war of the Fidesz government is often embedded in different situations, is contingent, is contradictory, and is linked to different projects. The struggle is not a series of consistent actions that build on each other. One of the results of our research is that in the field of popular music, as in other areas of society, hegemony-building does not function as a well-adjusted system but is dominated by a power politics of varying degrees of success and the extension of control: changing structures, appropriating old ones, and fine-tuning rarely succeeds directly and immediately, but it nevertheless manages to exert influence in different arenas of everyday life. In the next section, I will shed light on the normalization of culture-war political discourses through contemporary Hungarian popular music examples, showing how mainstream pop music can amplify political messages, convey emotions, and create links between propaganda and people’s everyday experiences.

Performing for Hungarian Unity

Representations of national unity were a priority for the Fidesz-led government in the early 2010s. This was seen in the act of granting citizenship to people of Hungarian ethnicity or with Hungarian ties living abroad, mostly in the neighboring countries of Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine. [One of the first laws passed](#) for which Fidesz used its two-thirds majority in parliament allowed ethnic Hungarians from abroad to obtain Hungarian citizenship on a fast-track basis, and later also granted them the right to vote. The symbolic significance of the law was most appreciated by Hungarian communities living in minority communities abroad going back to the end of the First World War when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was eliminated, and whose ties to the motherland were

traditionally strong. For many communities, this new institutional link with Hungary represented a form of historical reparation.

The most important new symbol of this act of national unification, however, was not the official Hungarian national anthem, but [the song “Nélküled” \(Without You\)](#) from 2007, by the band Ismerős Arcok (Familiar Faces), which had spread from a radical right-wing subculture into mainstream, which became even “[an alternative anthem](#).” The song’s lyrics treat the nation as a kind of blood kinship, and the prominent lines stress the solidarity among and shared responsibility for the members of the united nation: “Whatever may happen, while we live and until we die/ We are of one blood.” The other important line, “like the five million Magyars unheard by the world” at live gigs is invariably accompanied by the ritual of the lead singer raising his open palm to indicate the “five” million and the audience responding in kind, which alludes to the unresolved issue of ethnic-national unification and the trauma of Hungarian minority groups from the surrounding countries.

The song’s rock ballad-like instrumentation with a solo singer accompanied by a piano creates a strong affective effect and the lyrics express the idea of togetherness, solidarity, and national belonging. In sixteen years, “Nélküled” went through a process of popularization. [Many amateur covers](#) appeared on social media since 2007. Meanwhile, participatory engagement and community performances have become increasingly popular: at weddings, karaoke events, soccer games, family gatherings, local festivals, and as the closing-time song in local bars. Recognizing its popularity and the embedded symbolic capital of the song, the Fidesz government after 2010 also began to use it as an alternative anthem on official holidays, at sporting events, during Fidesz campaigns or even in the context of Covid-19 announcements, when restrictions were publicized accompanied by a new video of the song: [“Not a Single Hungarian is Alone”](#).

Hungary as a Christian Fortress

The restructuring of public education since 2010 and the popular musical embedding of the dissemination of Christian values also show the rise of the representation of the Christian nation. The pop-cultural embedding of the theme and performance of Christianity was less spontaneous and less of a grassroots initiative or a broad social demand. In 2020, the Hungarian [Parliament adopted a modification of the Fundamental Law of Hungary](#), which proclaims that Hungary protects the right of the children and provides education based on Christian values. Prior to this, in addition to centralizing public education, the government spent considerable public funds on the establishment of church schools, thus, renewing an old church

function and repositioning [the role of the church](#). The exploitation of major, spectacular events and the mobilizing potential of popular culture were important means of gaining government acceptance for church policy.

After 80 years, from September 5 to 12, 2021, the International Eucharistic Congress, an international gathering of Catholic leaders and believers, took place in Budapest. The preparation started in 2017. In addition to the traditional programs, the government found it important to enrich the program with pop music performers. In that year the government also launched a special [support program](#) for performers and artists to create new [religious popular songs](#), and with the aim of activating religious communities through popular music and spreading Christian values to a wider section of society. The government treated financial support as a key to trigger structural changes, thus, as a new technique of social engineering.

In this context, the long-term trends of instrumentalizing popular music, and the involvement of popular artists who, thanks to their embeddedness and popularity, are given a prominent role in the performance of the ideology. Among these performers there are those who have gained national recognition over the last decade through their appearances on TV talent shows (such as [Gabi Tóth](#)), those who established their long pop musical careers in the 1970s ([Róbert Szikora](#)) or those who are at the top of the mainstream pop music ([Ákos](#)). The performed songs were mostly new for the audience and were released or newly instrumentalized for this event, combining folk elements, praise and worship songs different from the pop performers' usual repertoire. The dissemination of religious values, the restructuring of the education system, the centralization of the media and government control over the infrastructure for the dissemination of ideologies function complementarily and help to represent the Christian image of the right-wing populist system.

The Protection of the Homeland

The national unity and the Christian character of the country are most closely linked to the core, substantive aspects of Fidesz' ideology, while militarism refers to the defense of these values, to an active struggle, to constant mobilization against the enemies of the nation. In the public representation of the 2015 migration crisis, refugees were defined as an external force threatening European values and Christianity, and harmful to Hungarian culture, against which the paternalistic right-wing populist leader's primary task was to defend. The modernization of the military infrastructure, the resources devoted to border protection, and the use of military colleges as a channel for upward mobility can serve as spectacular tools for the spread of militarism, but the recruitment of professional soldiers remains difficult and problematic. Musical bands were also

involved in this kind of propaganda. The radical right-wing rock band Kárpátia that outgrew its subcultural affiliations and became a band recognized by the Fidesz government through [state awards](#) released a song intended for the [march of the border fighters](#) in 2016 and wrote a mobilization song for a [local armored troop](#) in 2020.

In an effort to promote militarism and to improve the image of the Army, the Hungarian Defense Forces also sought to exploit the potential of popular music by promoting and financing the music video of the mainstream rock band Kowalsky and the Vega (Kowalsky and the Vega) titled “[Tizenötmillióból egy](#)” (One in Fifteen Million), and using it for direct recruitment purposes. The song was released in 2018 together with a video produced in collaboration with the Hungarian Defence Forces, and serves partly as promotion for the Forces, especially for recruitment of voluntary reserves. Kowalsky meg a Vega started out on the alternative rock scene in the 1990s, performing on the festival circuit, gradually growing into a mainstream act capable of filling the Budapest Arena, the largest music venue in Hungary and writing songs frequently played on the music radio channels.

While the song “[Tizenötmillióból egy](#)” gained popularity among the band’s fans through its inclusion on an album and [being performed live](#), its parallel career thanks to the military recruitment function of the video provided additional visibility for the government’s message about the social role of the military. The video clip indirectly thematizes the concept of the nation propagated by the government through the tropes of the homeland that needs to be defended, the soldiers in action and representing the mainstream gender roles and the role of the family in a crisis. The musical elements make a link between patriotism and the idea of self-sacrifice for the sake of the homeland with a melodic, stadium-rock-like chorus. In a promotional video at the end of the clip, the band thanks the army for their sacrifice, while we see excerpts from a reserve training session the band members participated in. All these examples illustrate how different genres of popular music can form homologies and create emotional involvement, mobilization, and personal engagement in everyday spaces of entertainment perceived as apolitical, and how they can deliver direct or indirect political messages to the public.

Conclusion

Listening to popular music, even if it is done passively, is an integral part of everyday life, but it can also take place in personal spaces from which people try to exclude politics. In my research with Emília Barna on [popular music and populism](#), we found that popular music can convey messages and direct emotions in a way that shapes the perception of social situations

and personal experience. This is not necessarily the result of conscious manipulation.

In the Hungarian case, it is clear that the populist, hegemonic power is able to control and influence certain segments of popular music production. They employ various means: controlling the infrastructure and the media, instituting a policy of support within which they provide opportunities for performance, and various regulatory steps. Despite this, the songs that are released are in general apolitical, with few political references in the various genres of mainstream music. Some performers declare that they [have conservative values](#) and [demonstrate allegiance](#) to power in [interviews or during campaign periods](#) rather than in performances and in their works.

The culture war of Fidesz governments can be understood as a permanently changing constellation, a dynamic field rather than a well-designed machine of manipulation or a well-managed cultural factory. With contradictory structural changes that do not address or ignore social problems, right-wing populist discourses reinforce the [image of a Christian conservative society](#) and make it self-evident to ordinary people through the state [constitution](#), the new role of the church in [educational system](#) and [popular culture](#). Popular music, as I have shown in the discussed cases, can easily provide political messages because it can engage audiences who are not reached by political messages, it can generate emotions in listeners who reject or avoid political content.

Three important areas of nation-building for right-wing populist hegemony and Fidesz are the strengthening of a sense of national unity and belonging, the promotion of Christian values and associated conservative ideologies, and of more militant forms of patriotism. In all three cases, it is clear that popular music is an important vehicle for popularizing ideology and can make political messages accessible. The performers' own image, the message of the songs, the political context, the current issues of the culture war, and the social context are a diverse and changing field that can only be brought together by the centralized communication of power. The consumers of popular music—the listeners—emphasize the message that suits their own tastes, beliefs, and sensibilities, but at the same time the associations with them become self-evident and taken for granted, thus helping to translate the culture war of the government into the everyday.

ILLIBERAL CULTURAL WAR AND HEGEMONY-BUILDING IN HUNGARIAN ACADEMIA: SCHOLARS BETWEEN CO- OPTATION AND RESISTANCE

by Szilvia Horváth
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Illiberal Regime-Building in Hungary

Following a short tenure around the millennium, Viktor Orbán became the prime minister of Hungary again in 2010. Now the strongman of illiberalism, he [won the most recent elections](#) in 2022 as well. Under his leadership, which has now endured for more than a decade, Hungarian democracy has [declined enormously](#). The de-democratization has occurred in a step-by-step manner, transforming the country into a prominent example of latter-day [autocratization](#).

Despite the huge differences between the two countries, the Hungarian and American strains of illiberalism are comparable, both [at the state level](#) and [in the field of academia](#). Especially striking are the sociological similarities between the conservative supporters of illiberalism in the two countries. Nonetheless, the resilience of the democratic institutions and the supportive effects of political culture in the United States may serve as better counterforces to tyrannic will than exist in Hungary. And, as David L. Swartz noted for in response to a question at the 2022 ECPR conference, one crucial obstacle to illiberal occupation of academia in the United States is the private character of most of the country's universities, in contrast to Hungary's largely state-funded universities—where recent “privatization” has in practice meant occupation by Orbán's cronies.

Hungary can be seen both as a model of illiberal regime-building and as a warning against the dangers that illiberalism poses to democracy. The occupation of academia is part of this regime-building, which embraces a cultural war, or an antagonistic fight led by the strongman-captured state. This situation calls for conceptualizing the effects not only on democracy, but also on citizens. The academy comprises both supporters of Orbán's illiberal turn and those who are either regime opponents or neutral researchers. The former are generally responsible for the heteronomous intervention of politics into the relatively autonomous academic sphere,

and the latter should use diverse strategies to overcome this. Interpreting these practices from a non-neutral pro-democratic standpoint and from the perspective of the oppressed, this paper explores the burdens that an illiberal turn puts on the shoulders of anyone living under such conditions.

Declaration of Culture War

But how—in what way—does such an occupation of a state, including a specific sphere, happen? Should an illiberal turn have an ideological—that is, a discursively explicated—background? Interestingly, there was a moment when Orbán expressed his will to transform the whole character of Hungarian society and the state. After the third consecutive victory of his party Fidesz (Alliance of Young Democrats) in 2018, [he declared](#) it his goal to build a “new era”:

And our two-thirds victory in 2018 is nothing short of a mandate to build a new era. [...] An era is a special and characteristic cultural reality. An era is a spiritual order [...]. A political system is usually determined by rules and political decisions. An era, however, is more than this. An era is determined by cultural trends, collective beliefs, and social customs. This is now the task we are faced with: we must embed the political system in a cultural era.

It is worth quoting these phrases at length, as they highlight that the logic of regime-building contains a moment when conflict intensifies, since politics aims to reach the very bottom of society in order to rewrite it. This practice rests on the polarization of society and deeply affects people's lives. Orbán expresses here his intention to intervene into “culture” broadly construed, subsuming it under the aims of a political regime that wants to extend its life beyond the normal periodicity of democracies. This kind of “era-building” is a deliberate call for a political culture war led by the state.

Moving from a *regime* to an *era* entails a moment of intensity change in the polarizing dynamics. The supporting ideology seems to be a combination of, among others, the [Schmittian political](#), which explicates politics as an inherently combative endeavor; the [Gramscian idea of hegemony](#), which helps to highlight the relevance of culture for politics and can be read as a call to occupy it; and, tacitly, [Tilo Schabert's](#) theory of [governance and leadership](#), which rests on the relevance of strong leaders in politics and the need to always stir up conditions and place occupied institutions in the hands of loyal cronies. It is interesting, although compatible with contemporary populisms, that the supporting regime ideology combines right- and left-wing ideological elements. Although some of these elements

are borrowed from the left, they are transformed, with the oversimplification of politics, into sheer battle, as exemplified in the works on culture war of a regime ideologue, [Márton Békés](#), who sketches the “political equation of the 21st century” for the “new right... that is not afraid of being revolutionary” as “Schmitt + Gramsci = Victory.”

The ideological background, as well as political discourse and institutional changes, serve to ground a kind of culture war, which always stems from—or is an expression of—political polarization. Orbán’s logic of regime-/era-building does not rest on the acceptance of the other but wants to minimize everything that resembles the other. To refer to [Chantal Mouffe](#)’s agonistic democratic theory, these are not the kind of agonistic conflicts that are necessary for democratic flourishing; instead, they represent an exclusionary illiberal practice that de-democratizes the country.

But what shape has this antagonistic logic taken in the cultural field? If we restrict our focus to the academic field, it is clear that it had undergone enormous change even before Orbán’s declaration of 2018. Universities lost most of their [economic autonomy](#) in the early 2010s; then [CEU was expelled](#) from the country after a series of political attacks; and around that time the government [banned state-supported gender studies education](#) by administrative means. Before the declaration, there was an (albeit sporadic) effort to build a parallel system of institutions through the creation of various historical institutes, an important move for the creation of a nationalist identity; thereafter, a more strategic and overarching restructuring occurred. Almost all the state-owned universities were “privatized”—meaning, in effect, that their leadership boards were packed by Orbán’s cronies, including incumbent ministers. On top of this, substantial financial support was given to [Mathias Corvinus Collegium](#), an institute with close ties to Fidesz.

Both political argumentation and its supporting ideology indicate an intent to change the intensity of political conflict. This seems to reflect a project that aims at a total occupation of culture. However, elite studies by individuals such as [Luca Kristóf](#) suggest that hegemonization was unsuccessful in various fields in the 2010s, especially in those subfields—like literature—where it is not formal status, but informal reputation, that matters. Moreover, as [Barna et al.](#) suggest, the different logics of ideological production limited overall cultural homogenization.

It seems that right-wing hegemonization may have internal limitations, whether imposed by elite rivalry, the reality of heterogeneous principles governing the field, or the fact that the field to be hegemonized is simply too large. Nonetheless, the regime aims to transform the whole cultural

field, going beyond the goals and tools that are common in the cultural policy of contemporary democracies.

Different Intensities of Hegemonization

As hegemonic practice intensifies, it urges the creation of a regime ideology and puts pressure on people to legitimize regime-building. [Gramscian and post-Gramscian theory](#) is useful here not just because it influences the horizon of regime intellectuals and leaders, but because it enables us to differentiate between interventions into the academy on the basis of intensity: co-optation and extension are two kinds of hegemonic practice that can be drawn from it.

Co-optation refers to an extension of power that moves forward in the ideological sphere by incorporating existing elements, along with those people in the field who are inclined to compromise. This is not a situation of sheer suppression or deliberate political intervention. It may lead to self-censorship, but equally, it may take a far smoother form: academics can continue to operate autonomously, but with new colleagues, generally less prepared academically, who support the regime. The former group of academics serve to legitimize these new colleagues' less academic practices, producing tacit support for the regime's ideology.

In terms of discursive content, co-optation means incorporating existing discursive elements but putting them into a different context. Historical studies may serve as good examples, as these are generally high-level research but can also be parts of a nationalist intellectual agenda. We can see here a rather blurred picture—real academic practice in a heteronomous academic context—that proves the transitory character of any compromise. It is perhaps no coincidence that in the first, less intensive period of cultural intervention, a set of historical institutes were established, forming a parallel institutional system to the standard set of academic institutions that already existed.

Co-optation is beneficial for powerholders, for two reasons. First, the ideological elements already exist, so powerholders do not have to invest in their innovation. Second, the compromise-oriented character of hegemony dramatically curtails opportunities for resistance. Part of the deal is that a co-opted citizen stays in the compromised situation (or accepts the deal), remaining silent at points when it would be worth engaging in critique. Co-optation thus involves tacit legitimization, not active ideological activity, and individuals retain a limited amount of autonomy.

In the expansive model, powerholders seek to conquer the field. Room for maneuver is not only limited but close to disappearing. Academics are

expected to follow the rules, decisions, and even unspoken will of the powerholders: they must have tacit knowledge of the oppressive rule. The academic function is not passive but active legitimization; scholars are required to take part in ideological production. This condition may have the somewhat unexpected consequence of supporting the articulation of antagonism, albeit outside the local regime of hegemonization.

What does extension, an expansive strategy of hegemonization, look like? The post-2018 phase of the culture war led to an overwhelming institutional transformation. An example of such a major intervention is the way the [University of Theatre and Film Arts](#) was practically privatized and occupied by a Fideszist board of trustees, leading to a series of student-professor protests (a very rare event due to the weakness of Hungarian civil society) that culminated in most of the academic staff being replaced with supporters of the regime.

Even minor interventions hint at what a culture war looks like as part of an illiberal regime-building effort. One example is anecdotal evidence that even in a STEM field, expressing one's political opinion on Facebook can result in an academic failing to receive national-level financial support. Another example is the case of the National University of Public Service, a Fidesz-flagship university with direct links to the Prime Minister's Office. In 2018, while I was working there, we organized a political theory conference that accepted gender studies papers, although the name of the relevant panel was carefully chosen to avoid using the "G-word." Some weeks later, a minister in the Prime Minister's Office called the head of the institute responsible to ask "what it was." Although this kind of micro-management is arguably rare, macro-level changes and the fact that intervention can occur on the micro level create an unfavorable climate for free academic research.

Freedom under Constraint

Illiberal regime-building and the culture war have an impact on individual lives and choices. Looking at this situation from the perspective of those for whom this situation is unfavorable, let us pose an important question: what is the extent of their freedom and what are the limits thereon?

Co-optation is permissive compared to expansive hegemony. But the room for maneuver is not static; the borders of freedom should therefore be explored from time to time. In situations of co-optation, researchers are used to legitimize causes unrelated to academia or causes coming from the political power. At a certain point, they may start to wonder whether it would be more advantageous to explicitly identify themselves with the

regime, building a profile of loyalty and creating/renewing the regime's ideology.

The limitations on their freedom and the retaliatory consequences for overstepping these bounds are heavier burdens for those who do not identify themselves with the regime. Powerholders—whether state or local—will likely invest more resources in co-opting or, if co-optation fails, oppressing them. Coopting political-ideological enemies is a strategic choice for powerholders, for two main reasons. First, a co-opted researcher appears on the radar of power, which can control her or him through punishment or reward. Second, co-opting a researcher makes it possible to divide similar-minded intellectual groups, as co-optation forces them to decide who is a friend, who is an enemy, and what kind of actions are acceptable under pressure. In other words, co-optation blurs the boundaries of identities and the formerly clear-cut difference between the morally good and bad.

In practice, it can be hard to capture the point where passive legitimacy must become active. This is supposedly due to the rhetorical nature of power, which should never reveal how it functions; it should hide its violent core. The change seems to be induced by a change in the intensity of politics. Expansive hegemony and active legitimacy demands are fostered by polarization.

I have tried to outline the logic of hegemonization as a regime-building strategy in the field of epistemic authority. I hope it has become clear that these strategies restrict freedom, and individuals are expected to react to this fact. Individual answers may differ, and there are various means to self-legitimize obedience. Indeed, there are numerous reasons that people accept such unwanted rule.

First, there is *fear-led compromise*. The inner voice of this type might sound like: "The fear of retaliation motivates me to make a compromise. And therefore, I try to convince the Power that I am a good guy." Second, there is *bureaucratic/pragmatic compromise*. The inner voice says: "I am making a compromise because I want to satisfy the demands of power, and I cannot do it in any other way. This is a common thing; this is just a job." Third, there is *career-based compromise*. "I will do this because I am a clever guy who carves out advantages even from drawbacks. If I have to compromise, then it is better to make a career as well." A subcategory of this third group is when one experiences this pressure not as a compromise but as an opportunity: "I am the one who has recognized that a little flattery may help me to bypass limitations and launch my career/have more money/have more influence/have more prestige."

Room for Maneuver and Limitations on Academic Research

Scholars' ability to conduct research under constrained conditions depends on external factors, and context-dependency leads to various types of research, of which I identify three: 1. *Justifying (legitimizing)*, 2. *Standard*, and 3. *Critical. Justifying works* are those that fulfill the political or ideological needs of the power. Examples of justifying research are nationalism studies that support national identity-building or articles written by regime intellectuals exploring the constitutional and legitimate character of the already [permanent state of exception](#).

Standard work is that which can be produced under normal conditions, without political interference, and which follows the norms of professional standards. (Let us leave aside the serious problems this kind of academia may have.)

By *critical work*, I refer to academic works that are seen as being critical of power; they are “critical” from the perspective of the power-holders. This demonstrates that an authoritarian-leaning power can always be challenged by standard science, not just by a well-defined normative position or by a science that is explicitly critical of the regime.

Coopted authors should make mainly standard science, although part of the deal is that it is forbidden to write about certain issues or that they must be re-contextualized in a way suited to the regime's ideological perspective (for example, following academic norms and standards but calling the field “family studies” instead of “gender studies”). The difference between that which is ideologically proper and that which is improper is generally tacit, not forced.

In *expansive* hegemony, both standard and justifying scholarly works can be produced, but the power aims to make them the same. That is, they aim to turn their socio-political vision into an internationally recognized standard. This puts pressure on academics, and may be the point where a non-supporter of illiberalism reaches the limit of cooperation.

A representative of power can *read* works through a critical scholarly lens at any time. Anything can turn out to be critical academic work—that is, work that is critical of to the regime and therefore capable of threatening it—*after the fact*. For example, Andrea Kozáry, a deceased professor formerly at the National University of Public Service, wrote extensively on [hate crimes](#) in law enforcement, including the gender perspective, and organized a conference on these themes in 2019, when the Orbán government's moral and political crusade against gender studies was rising to the intensity of the friend/enemy distinction. Following trumped-up charges, [she was fired](#).

The practical reason for this might be not only that conference, but her general profile.

In the longer term, less intensive interventions than firing decisions also affect people's choices. Together, these practices can effectively support illiberal regime-building in a cultural field.

Some Conclusions

The academy is just one part of culture, broadly construed, that is valuable for illiberal regime-building. It has a specific epistemic authority useful for ideological production and legitimacy creation. Supposedly, it will always be exposed to authoritarian-leaning politics, as academics can play a significant role both in legitimizing and in criticizing power. Understanding the subjugation of the academy or its parts is important because it can illuminate methods of subjugation that might be extended to the whole of society. What the Hungarian case teaches us is that state capture by a leader or a party can be detrimental to democracy and that this will not stop at superficial aspects of human existence. A "culture war" is led by a single power in an effort to influence the foundations of society. It may lead to extreme, civil war-like divisions of society and to the general loss of individual freedom. In order to avoid this, citizens should be aware of the danger posed by leaders who aim to divide society and exploit this division for the sake of remaining in power. As the Hungarian case also suggests, it is a far greater task to regain lost democracy than to push back the will that tries to destroy democracy.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE FOR ILLIBERAL NATION BRANDING: THE MAKING OF EURASIAN CIVILIZATIONISM IN HUNGARY

By Katrin Kremmler

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This paper investigates the role of culture in the making of illiberal hegemony in Hungary from 2014 to early 2023, in particular the political project of engineering, institutionalizing, and disseminating a Eurasian civilizationist narrative in national cultural heritage and popular culture. Rather than offering a culturalist account—which cannot explain the stability of illiberal hegemony in a former constitutional democracy in East-Central Europe where, before 2010, the majority of the population backed democratization (Scheiring and Szombati [2020](#), Scheiring [2020](#))—I argue that Orbánomics (Scheiring [2020](#)) and [Hungary's Eastern Opening Policy](#) are accompanied by a new, still understudied project of Eurasian cultural nation-branding.

Taking an approach informed by scholarship on the popular culture of Neo-Nationalism (Feischmidt [2014](#)), mainstreaming the extreme (Feischmidt and Hervik [2015](#)), and ethno-traditionalist inclusion and racial exclusion (Feischmidt & Szombati [2017](#)), I argue that the advent of Eurasian civilizationism has added a whole new dimension of ethno-/racial politics in which the natural sciences (archaeogenetics, bioarchaeology, and archaeology) play a central role.

My descriptive analysis starts with the mainstreaming of a far-right cultural heritage event; moves through the institutionalization of the Eurasian narrative in Hungarian state museums, popular heritage culture, and the educational system; and traces the project's regional expansion and Eurasian connections. This new Hungarian project of civilizational nation-branding is clearly engineered to be an integral part of the new emerging pan-Turkic geo-economic block.

In 2007, far-right actors on the fringe of Hungarian academia started revitalizing Hungarian Turanism (Ablonczy [2022](#))—understood here as the belief in a shared ethnic link with people of Turkic descent—at a cultural

heritage festival called *Kurultáj*, or tribal assembly. In 2010, the promotion of Turanism was taken up by the Orbán government, and since 2019 it has been institutionalized in new illiberal scientific institutions, which have become instrumental in furthering Hungary's geo-economic alignment with Turkey, Central Asia, and China. Showcasing combat, archery, and horse-race re-enactments in which 500-600 re-enactors participate on horseback and on foot, national and international ethno-sports competitions, neo-pagan rituals, nationalist rock music, and Hungarian and Eurasian folklore concerts and performances, *Kurultáj* resembles popular medieval festivals all over Europe, but in larger dimensions, attracting 150,000-200,000 visitors over a long weekend.

Kurultáj is also a platform for popular sciences education, presenting the culture of nomadic Eurasian warriors in a framing of archaeological patriotism (see Laruelle [2021](#)), in displays provided by the Hungarian Natural History Museum, regional archaeology museums, and since 2022 the Hungarian National Museum. The new Eurasian “ancestors” are represented as “Europid-Mongolid” racial types, with archaeological crania and facial reconstructions prepared by the Hungarian Museum of Natural History. A wide range of reenactment groups and heritage communities informed by experimental archaeology projects perform the combat and cultural techniques of nomad warrior military elites considered relevant for Hungarian military history and historical Hungarian statehood, dating back to the Huns and Avars (see Kremmler [2023](#)). This allows the Hungarian government to integrate two seemingly conflicting civilizationist agendas: that of *white* Christian Europe as “real Europe” (Bassin [2022](#)) and Eurasian civilizationism for geo-economic, cultural, and scientific co-operation with Turkic Muslim states. Since 2014, the content and aesthetics of these heritage events in Hungary have been clearly informed by major cultural heritage sites and events in Central Asia and Turkey: the National Museum in Astana, the Spirit of Tengri music festival in Kazakhstan, and the World Nomad Games (see Pelkmans [2022](#)) in Kyrgyzstan.

As Aurélie Stern has shown in her ethnographic study of the Turkish delegations at *Kurultáj* 2021 and 2022, the festival serves as an intermediate space for the circulation of conservative ideas at transnational level. It is a space for the construction of a transnational conservative identity, where religious differences are resolved through Tengrism (see Laruelle [2007](#)) as a shared ancient religion evoked in shamanic ceremonies (Stern [2022](#)).

In the context of Turkish Eurasianism, *Kurultáj* is referred to as one of the biggest Turanist events. Since 2014, there have been many Turkish visitors, while the cultural stage is sponsored by the Turkish Cooperation and

Coordination Agency (TIKA). Links to the new (Pan-)Turkic History Museum and Statue Park in Ankara can also be demonstrated.

Since the event's inception in 2008, the volunteers providing event security have been a regional branch of the *Magyar Gárda Mozgalom* (New Hungarian Guard Movement), a legal successor organization of the far-right paramilitary Hungarian Guard that was disbanded in 2009. Every other year, the organizing body (Magyar-Turán Foundation, *Magyar-Turán Alapítvány*) hosts a smaller, "domestic" event called *Ősök napja* (Day of Ancestors) that caters to ethnic Hungarians in the neighboring countries of the "Carpathian basin," the historical kingdom of Hungary in its pre-1920 borders that represents its ethno-national space.

In 2014–2022, I observed the once-strong far-right presence at *Kurultáj* and *Ősök napja* decline while government delegations from Turkey and Central Asia became more prominent, their television teams covering the event. Along these lines, the internationally renowned Kazakh Ethno Folk Ensemble "Turan" has performed at several *Kurultaj* festivals since 2010.

The Orbán government has increasingly embraced the festival since 2010. The opening ceremony is regularly held at the Parliament Building, and speaker of the National Assembly László Kövér delivered the welcome address at the event site in 2018 and 2022. In recent years, the government has provided the festival with around 1 million Euros per year in funding.

Kurultáj's target domestic audience encompasses a broad spectrum, from "ordinary" families, to individuals performing with their respective cultural or sport associations, to far-right politicians and individuals displaying explicit far-right affinities. Hungarian society is said to be polarized to a "pernicious" degree; the polarization between liberal and national camps is about not only political affiliations, but also notions of national culture and cultural belonging. It is important to note that the so-called "national camp" is not unified in terms of political party affiliations and cannot be assumed to be pro-government. One aim of the new Eurasian project is to integrate and unite the "national camp" in meta-political, *cultural* terms.

In 2022, international guests of honor at *Kurultáj* included Binali Yıldırım, former Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey; Baghdad Amreyev, President of the Organization of Turkic States; Mehmet Süreyya Er, President of TÜRKPA; Azamat Zhamankulov, Minister of Culture, Sports and Information of Kyrgyzstan; Avazjon Karimov, Deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism of Uzbekistan; Sultan Raev, President of TÜRKSOY; and President of the World Ethnosport Confederation (WEC) Necmeddin Bilal Erdoğan, a son of the Turkish president. Besides high-ranking

government and cultural delegations, the regular presence of Turkish far-right politicians and movements is also documented (Stern 2022). Sinan Oğan from the Nationalist Movement Party (2011-2017) has attended since at least 2016 (seen [here](#) posing with András Zsolt Bíró, *Kurultáj* founder and head of the Magyar-Turán Foundation, in 2016).

This new Eurasian political project is not just a recent invention engineered and administered top-down. It draws on a wide spectrum of alternative prehistory narratives that have existed in the popular culture of the nationalist camp since the nineteenth century. These narratives have been modernized and streamlined for the twenty-first century thanks to the advent and rapid development of archaeogenetics, in a pattern fairly similar to what have been described as “archaeological patriotism” in Central Asia (Laruelle 2021) and “genetic ethnology” (McMahon 2020). Indeed, there are shared genealogies with Central Asian physical anthropology dating back to the 1960s (see below).

As the Orbán government has gradually taken over such state institutions of education and culture as universities, museums and scientific collections, theaters, etc., this new Eurasian narrative has come to be disseminated via museum exhibitions, state media and social media, music and theater productions, and the education system. At stake is the construction of a new hegemonic illiberal epistemic architecture (I thank Annastiina Kallius for suggesting this term). As will be shown, the Magyar-Turán Foundation has been expanding their event and exhibition activities to neighboring countries since the 2020 Trianon Centenary.

The Concept of Ethnogenesis

A central component of *Kurultáj* are displays of archaeological crania and facial reconstructions of “Europid-Mongoloid” racial types, provided by scientists affiliated with the Hungarian Museum of Natural History in Budapest (HMNH). *Kurultáj*’s founder, András Zsolt Bíró, is a trained physical anthropologist affiliated with the HNHM. The event’s founding narrative was his research into the presumed kinship between “Magyars” and the tribe of the “Madjars” in the Torgay region of Kazakhstan. The study, published in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (2009), claims only a *possible* relation between the two samples, but its findings have been communicated in Hungary as hard proof that the paternal branches of (a small sample of) “Hungarians” in Hungary (obtained through sampling procedures obscure to the external reader) and “most of the Madjar men in Torgay” had met at some point in time. This study set everything in motion.

Bíró’s search for genetic relations drew on older research from his own discipline. In the 1960s, physical anthropologist Tibor Tóth, then director

of the HMNH's anthropology department, [deployed](#) Soviet craniometric methods developed to study the USSR's Asian populations to study archaeological crania from Hungary.

Grafted onto the interwar literature, these methods became standard practice to determine “Asian migrant components” in archaeological skulls from burial sites in the Carpathian basin, and remain so to this day. Tóth conducted research in the Torgay region in 1965 and published his claims of shared ancestry in 1966. These were later picked up by nationalist actors within Hungarian Turkology.

As Bíró himself states on the Kurultáj website, he was invited by Kazakh anthropologist Orazak Ismagulov on a research visit to the Central State Museum in Almaty in 2005, where he was introduced to the anthropological and historical literature of Kazakhstan and Central Asia. When the so-called Madjar tribe of the Torgay region was discussed along the lines of comparing bones from different historical periods in 2006, he joined the expedition to the tribe's territory, took samples, and compared them to a Hungarian forensic database.

Thus, for parts of the nationalist scholarly and scientific community in Hungary, Bíró's findings served as scientific hard evidence for previous decades of quests for ancient Eastern origins and relations by physical anthropologists, archaeologists, and orientalists.

In 2016, Bíró received new scientific backing from geneticists at Szeged University. Researching ninth-century archaeological burial sites in Hungary, they identified a genetic link to Central Asia. These scientists started presenting their findings at *Kurultáj* in 2016, and since [2018](#) have published them in a number of international scientific journals. In March 2023, Bíró gave a [presentation](#) on the ethnogenesis of the Huns at the National Museum of Kazakhstan in Astana.

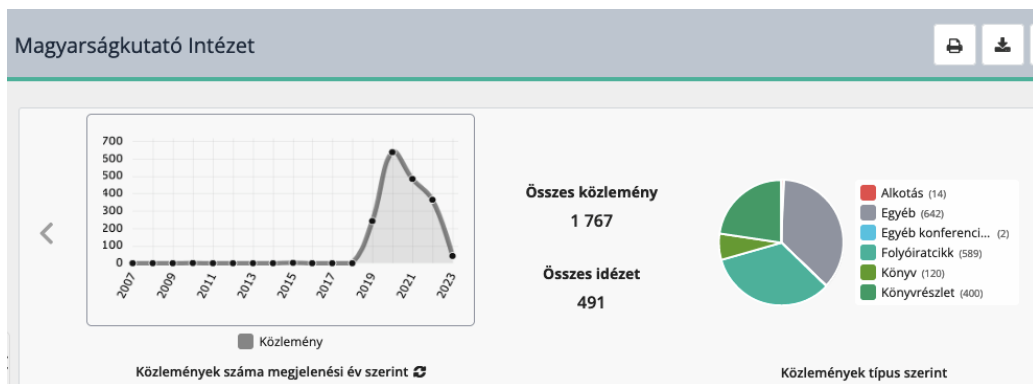
Illiberal Transformation of Science and Scholarship

Over time, the most prominent scientific actors at *Kurultáj* have all become affiliated with the new government Research Institute of Hungarian Studies (*Magyarágkutató Intézet*, [MKI](#)), founded in 2019. The term *magyarság*, innocuously translated as “Hungarian,” transports interwar ethnic semantics. Interwar “*magyarság* research” was an interdisciplinary national sciences paradigm of studying the nation's body politics (*nemzettest*) and ancient cultural and biological origins in an approach that integrated physical anthropology, archaeology, folklore studies, ethnology, medieval history, linguistics, and orientalist studies. In physical anthropology, this involved measuring and comparing ninth-century archaeological skulls and

skeletons with living populations of the post-imperial ethnic Hungarian majority in order to map the *nemzettest*. While most ethnic minorities were considered compatible, Hungarians with Jewish and Romani backgrounds were excluded as “alien races” on the grounds not only of racial biology, but also of their lack of autochthony as “recent” arrivals, modern-era “newcomers” to the Carpathian basin, conceived as the Magyars’ kingdom for a millennium.

MKI employees combine references to interwar authors on the medieval Hungarian chronicles with cutting-edge archaeogenetics, with the declared mission of strengthening Hungarian national identity. The institute runs on a considerable budget, employs over one hundred researchers, and has ratified cooperation agreements with most of the major Hungarian universities, as well as with Turkish scientific institutions (İstanbul Üniversitesi and Maarif Schools Hungary) and the Mongolian Academy of Sciences’ Archaeology Institute. MKI scientists publish extensively in international scientific journals and cooperations, and flood the Hungarian Science Bibliography (MTMT) with content.

Figure 1. MKI papers in the Hungarian Science Bibliography



Source: (MTMT), March 2023

MKI addresses the public through (pro-)government and social media, including through an agreement with Mediaworks Hungary, one of the biggest media companies in Hungary, to supply the latter with exclusive content for its (pro-)government daily newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation). The MKI board sees their work as continuing the interwar Turanist tradition of science and scholarship, and gives regular accounts of the MKI’s scientific progress on *M5*, the cultural channel of government TV:

Between the two world wars, there was a chance of a Turanian turn to the East, which then was cut off in 1945 and during the communist period, for ideological reasons. We needed to pick up where our predecessors, these thinkers and researchers were forced to stop.”—László Tamás Vizi, MKI’s Deputy Director-General for Science, on *M5*’s “[Ez itt a kérdés](#)” (This Is the Question), June 1, 2022.

As of early 2023, MKI is becoming very vocal about its mission having succeeded. It claims to have “reinstated the genuine past of the nation, restoring the truths of our chronicles [...] and popular consciousness, which had been expunged from history with defiant insolence by malicious adventurers of foreign origin [Habsburgs, Communists, Jews], and with sheer blunt violence in the absence of scientific facts.” (Original English text on the MKI [website](#), February 20, 2022).

Integrating European Whiteness and Eurasian Hybridity

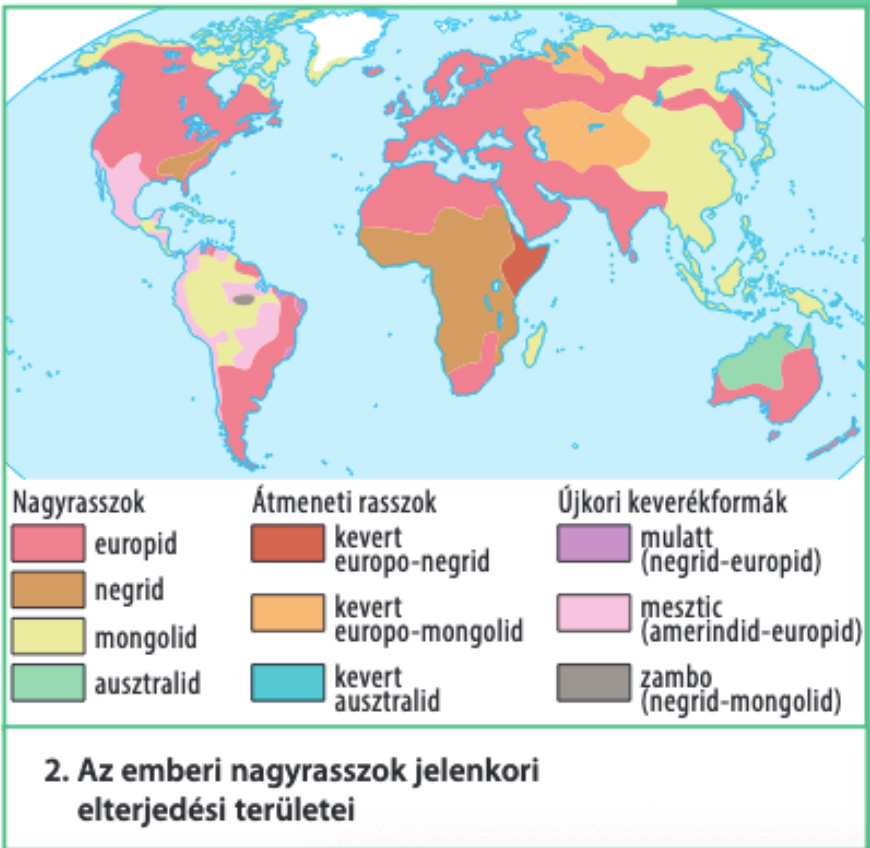
It seems pan-Turanist discourse and [visual popular culture](#) is generating its own form of Eurasian racial-civilizationist hybridity. At the same time, as has been widely reported, Viktor Orbán, in his annual speech at the Băile Tușnad resort in Romania in July 2022, claimed that Hungarians “are not a mixed race” and that countries where different races mixed were “no longer nations.” Under his leadership, he said, Hungary would fight racial mixing because “we do not want to become a mixed race.”

Asked for comments, some participants in *Kurultáj* 2022 [displayed](#) surprising anti-racist awareness and cultural openness, and voiced quite critical opinions: obviously, the Prime Minister was unaware of the Hungarians’ ancient origins; his statement was as unfortunate as it was racist “against our own kin.”

Of course, the speech at Băile Tușnad was whiteness talk addressed to fellow Hungarians in Romania. To other audiences and for other purposes, Orbán has employed Eurasianness talk of Hungarians as a “half-Asian nation” since as early as 2012.

It should also be noted that Orbán’s speech was in accordance with current Hungarian biology textbook knowledge. Racial classification remains an uncontested part of the curriculum of physical anthropology in Hungary, as well as of the school curriculum. The “Europid, Mongoloid, Negroid, [and] Australid” types were included in the new fifth-grade science and ninth-/tenth-grade biology textbooks published by the Ministry of Education in 2020.

Figure 2. “The current distribution of the great human races”



Source: (Biology, ninth/tenth grade, p. 265)

There is a temporal dimension to racial mixing as mapped here. Mixing between the “great races” is alleged to have produced “transitional races,” as distinct from “modern-era mixed forms” (*újkori keverékformák*): “mulatto, mestizo, zambo.” On this map, the “Europo-mongolid transitional race” is the only hybrid form for Europe and Eurasia in the northern hemisphere. This implies a conceptual distinction between racial mixing as a result of the migration of ancient cultures (Eurasian ethnogenesis) and racial mixing as a result of modern colonialism and migration from the Global South (similar to the racist logics of anti-Arab sentiment in Turkish nativist discourse).

Of course, Orbán's whiteness talk refers to the latter. And as Boróka Parászka has noted, this is preparing for a new dimension of "ethnic" economic policy: Viktor Orbán, [referring](#) to Hungarian communities beyond the borders as "populations" from which the missing Hungarian workforce can be replaced—as opposed to "foreign populations"—gives a very concrete meaning to demotion, disenfranchisement, and discrimination on racial and ethnic grounds (Parászka [2023](#)).

Culture War and Cultural Mainstreaming

The government's illiberal culture war rhetoric is explicitly theorized by intellectuals from government think tanks, drawing on a synthesis of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, right-wing political theorist Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction, and even postcolonial authors (see Kolodziejczyk and Huigen [2023](#):15). One hub of government intellectuals is the journal *Kommentár*. Chief editor Márton Békés, head of research at the House of Terror museum in Budapest, authored a popular culture war manual (*Culture War*, 2020); the text on its back cover [reads](#), "Everything begins in culture, happens through it and returns to it. Whoever recognizes the hegemony of culture and can develop his own hegemony in it will eventually win everything. The acquisition of a cultural majority will sooner or later lead to the emergence of a political majority. This book is a guide to why and how to conquer the cultural sphere that underpins politics. In other words, it is about the theory and practice of the struggle for cultural power and how to create cultural hegemony."

This domestic culture war is fought to break what the regime considers the remaining hegemony of liberal urban intellectual and academic circles affiliated with the previous regime in the field of culture and academia.

In 2019, physical anthropologist Zsolt Bernert, one of the scientists who had prepared the anthropology displays at *Kurultáj* since 2010, was appointed the new director of the HNHM. His first project was to display the narrative of Hun-Avar-Magyar ancestry in the exhibition *Attila Örökösei—A hunoktól az Árpád-házig* ([Attila's Heirs](#): From the Huns to the House of Árpád, October 2019). In 2021, László L. Simon, a Fidesz MP and former state secretary for culture, who is a writer and poet by profession, was appointed as the new director-general of the Hungarian National Museum (HNM). Simon is part of the editorial board of *Kommentár*, which since his appointment as director-general of HNM has been presenting new issues in the Hungarian National Museum on a regular basis (Issue [2022/1](#), [2022/3](#) Conservative Revolution, Issue [2023/1](#) Magyar World).

In 2022, the HNM had its own exhibition [yurt](#) at *Kurultáj* for the first time. Several HNM archaeologists also presented in the science tent. The new Eurasian narrative has been established and institutionalized to a point that it can integrate the scholarship of individuals whom even critical Hungarian scholars consider to be *legitimate* academic actors *not* known for illiberal affiliations or nationalist leanings. At this point, long-time festival audiences are disposed to embrace *any* new information about Eurasian nomad peoples past and present as part of Hungary's civilizational heritage and national identity.

The new narrative is disseminated via school textbooks, projects of national pedagogy outside the public school system, and the wide range of traditionalist cultural and sports organizations founded and/or supported by the government over the last decade. In 2021, an [ethnosport federation](#) was established, under the leadership of András Zsolt Bíró, to ensure regular Hungarian participation in the World Nomad Games. Hungarian equestrians were introduced to [Köböre/kökpár](#) as the ancient sport of Hungarian shepherds on the Great Hungarian Plains. A range of historical combat sports and re-enactment groups covering the fifth century to the early modern period regularly perform at a number of public events and in film productions.

Figure 3. Hungarian National Opera House advertisement for rock opera “Stephen the King” (by Levente Szörényi and János Bródy), premiere 2020



As the cultural institutions are taken over by Fidesz actors as part of their effort to establish illiberal cultural hegemony, designs and motifs inspired by “ancient Magyar mythology,” which carry Eurasian nomadic aesthetics, are generated and fed into the cultural mainstream through the repertoires of national cultural institutions. Recent examples include the [National Equestrian Theater](#), the [Open Air Theater on Margit Island](#), the [National Opera House](#) (an advertisement for one of its productions reinterprets St. Stephen’s crown, the symbol of constitutional sovereignty, as a felt yurt), the [Hungarian National Museum](#) (in its 2022 exhibition “Sabretache Plates, the Treasures of the Hungarian Conquering Elite”), the [Hungarian National Theater](#), and the [Capital Circus of Budapest](#) (“The Spirit of the Steppe,” 2023). A major feature film, *1242: Gateway to the West*, a Hungarian-Mongolian coproduction, will be released in late 2023.

Eurasian nomad and ancient Magyar aesthetics are increasingly present in the public space. In 2022, the Hungarian National Bank erected a statue of a golden Miracle Deer as a new, monumental [emblem](#) of the nation’s dynamic economic recovery and expansion.

Irredentism and Expansion

Since 2020, the Magyar-Turán Foundation has been expanding its focus and activities to neighboring countries. In both *Kurultáj* and MKI discourse, the Eurasian civilizationist narrative of historical Hungarian statehood is always explicitly linked with Trianon [irredentism](#) (see Feischmidt [2020](#)), to the point that the MKI’s government website [quotes](#) the irredentist, antisemitic author [Albert Wass](#) (1908-1998) (“Water runs, stone remains” from the poem “Message Home” [*Üzenet hazá*]) and the irredentist so-called “Hungarian Creed” (*Hiszkegy*), the “national prayer” of the Horthy era (1920-1944) (“we believe in an eternal divine truth, we believe in the resurrection of Hungary”).

The *Ősök napja* festivals represent the unity of Hungarians in the Carpathian basin, and the Magyar-Turán Foundation is an active supporter of the Székler autonomy movement in Romania, with a presence at the Székler Freedom Day celebrations since 2012. In 2020, the year of the Trianon Centenary, *Ősök napja* festivals planned in neighboring countries were cancelled for COVID. Since 2021, *Ősök napja* festivals have been organized in Serbia, Romania, and Slovakia. They were held in 2021 and 2022 in Bajša/Vojvodina, Serbia, under the political term of *Délvidék* (literally “southern province,” referring to the southern part of the Kingdom of Hungary before 1920). In April 2023, the Magyar-Turán Foundation co-organized the first archaeological exhibition on the Hungarian Conquest era in Serbia at the Municipal Museum of Bečej (Градски музеј Бечеј), in cooperation with the Budapest Museum of Natural History.

A first *Ősök napja* in Romania was held in Belin/Széklerland in 2022. The first *Ősök napja* in Slovakia will take place in 2023 in Dunajská Streda, in co-operation with the municipality and the Žitnoostrovské múzeum. Here, the political term “*Felvidék*” (literally, “upper province”) is used, a reference to the northern part of the Kingdom of Hungary before 1920.

These expansions of the Eurasian narrative to neighboring countries, in co-operation with local municipal museums, all focus on areas that were returned to Hungary by the Vienna Awards (1938/1940), overruled by the 1947 Paris Peace Treaties.

Besides domestic and regional expansion of the Magyar-Turán Foundation’s activities, an interesting example of *Kurultáj* as an interface for Hungarian-Turkish Turanist projects can be found in the Etimesgut district of Ankara. The Turkish History Museum and Park ([*Türk Tarih Müzesi ve Parkı*](#)), a new open-air history museum, was founded in 2021 by the municipality and features pan-Turkic history from the Scythian and Göktürk periods up to the modern republic. It is becoming a popular educational site for the general public as well as international [university students](#), and is used as a backdrop for cultural diplomacy meetings with Turkey’s Central Asian partners.

Among the khagan statues of the [16 Great Turkic Empires](#), the sculpture of Bayan I., the first *khagan* of the Avar Khaganate (562–602), was clearly modeled on the facial reconstruction of an Avar from the Kunbábony burial site in Hungary, which has been displayed as part of the “Hall of the Ancestors” at *Kurultáj* since 2014.

Figure 4. Tarih Müzesi ve Parkı,



Source: Facebook

Figure 5. Statues of khagans of the 16 Great Turkic Empires, *Tarih Müzesi ve Parkı*,



Source: Facebook



Figure 6. *Kurultaj 2022*, Attila's Yurt, Hall of Ancestors, reconstructions of archaeological skulls, Hungarian Museum of Natural History. *Source:* author's photo.

Figure 7. *Kurultáj 2022*, Attila's Yurt, Hall of Ancestors, reconstruction of an Avar from the Kunbábony burial site by Gyula Skultéty, Hungarian Museum of Natural History



Source: Author's photo.

Conclusion: Eurasian Civilizationism for Illiberal Nation-Branding

While only a few years ago external observers could explain the ethno-nationalist turn in Hungarian politics by reference to an expanding ethno-nationalist cultural industry that had effectively commodified and banalized radical sentiments, as of 2023 it is clear that the illiberal regime itself is the major ethnopolitical entrepreneur (Brubaker [2004](#)), building its civilizationist project on new national sciences and working with a range of

embedded popular cultural heritage movements and communities. The Orbán government won another term in 2022 and clearly has long-term plans. At stake is a fast-evolving process of illiberal cultural politics and the construction of a new hegemonic illiberal epistemic architecture.

Such uses of national culture and heritage for illiberal nation-branding projects should be seen in the broader context of global emerging (semi-)peripheries. Looking at the Indian case, Ravinder Kaur describes the development of the twenty-first-century nation-as-investment-destination phenomenon, entailing “a full capitalization (transformation) of the nation into an income-generating asset: a new imaginary of the national territory as an infrastructure-ready enclosure for capital investment, *its cultural identity distilled into a competitive global brand* and its inhabitants—designated as demographic dividend—income-generating human capital [...]. This internalization of the market logic reconfiguring the nation state into *an enclosed commercial-cultural zone*” (emphasis mine) is what Kaur calls “the *brand new nation*: the nation revitalized and renewed as a profitable business enterprise with claims to ownership over cultural property within its territory” (Kaur [2020](#):8).

And this new Hungarian project of civilizationist nation-branding clearly aims at expansion on two fronts: the current borders of Hungary and as an integral part of what is considered the emerging pan-Turkic geo-economic block.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ILLIBERALISM

by Anna Kende

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Social and political psychology treats social relations within stable and long-standing democracies as the default context for human existence, while in fact political instability, social conflict, structural discrimination, and illiberalism may be a more common and, therefore, more “default” context of existence. Social and political tensions, nationalism, homophobia, prejudice against indigenous and immigrant minorities, as well as the success of (right-wing) populist and authoritarian politics that capitalize on these tensions represent the reality of most people living in the world today. Therefore, when addressing the psychology of illiberalism, we are grasping broadly shared human experiences that should be considered just as universal as the experiences of humans in stable democracies.

Using Laruelle’s broad [definition of illiberalism](#) as a skeptical or negative stance on liberal democracy as a political system, my aim is to show some common psychological mechanisms that, on the one hand, appear as antecedents of creating and maintaining political instability, conflict, and structural discrimination; and, on the other hand, are direct psychological consequences of living in societies characterized by illiberal political systems.

The role of basic human psychological needs can be recognized in all forms of human behavior and thinking. One such [psychological need](#) is to exercise some level of control over and mastery of a situation. Being and feeling in control is undoubtedly a more challenging task within a political context of instability and within a position of structural disadvantage than in socially and politically stable and advantaged social settings. Social psychological research has identified important mechanisms that create the illusion of control for individuals regardless of their background. Although these mechanisms are psychologically meaningful, functional, and even adaptive, on a societal level they create a downward spiral that deepens social conflicts and structural discrimination and solidifies illiberal regimes. These concepts build on individual psychological processes, but they can be contingent on societal-level, collective phenomena. In the next section, I present key collective psychological processes that can be characterized as means to achieve a sense of control and contribute to the creation and maintenance of illiberalism.

Ingroup Glorification

Hungary and most of the surrounding region is [characterized](#) by a history of benefitting from patronage, being the victim of oppressions and violence, and perpetrating violence. These collective experiences influence how people identify with or disidentify from their ingroup (i.e., their nation or Europe) and affect current intergroup relations. Groups offer everything we need in order to function in the world. People's behavior, information processing, emotions, self-concept, and positive self-esteem are all derived from belonging to positively evaluated groups. Hence, identifying with one's ingroup is foundational to human existence. Groups not only make us feel similar to others, but also offer a sense of uniqueness, the source of which is group comparison (see [Social Identity Theory](#)). However, beyond the positive outcome of group belonging, group comparison can easily turn into competition and discrimination; [ingroup love is accompanied by outgroup hate](#). The main conditions of outgroup hate are the level of importance we attach to the groups to which we belong, the values of the group, and the attributes we attach to other groups.

A division between different modes of identification is rooted in Adorno's concept of [genuine and pseudo-patriotism](#), and reflected in all other conceptualizations of [patriotism and nationalism](#). More generally, we can distinguish between two dominant [modes of identification](#): (1) attachment, which is a form of identification serving one's positive self-esteem; and (2) a blind and uncritical commitment that glorifies the ingroup due to a belief "that the in-group is better and more worthy than other groups" (p. 700). While the two are positively associated—that is, those with a stronger attachment are more likely to glorify their ingroup than weakly attached group members—they have vastly different consequences for society.

Ingroup glorification entails a proneness to conflict. High [glorifiers use more stereotyping](#), they are more likely to [disregard moral considerations](#) for members of other groups, and they are more sensitive to [threat](#) and [provocation](#). Furthermore, glorification itself [intensifies in the context of intergroup conflicts](#) as group members increase their loyalty and commitment in the face of threats.

To show that glorification as a mode of identification is an important predictor of hostility and conflict, we [compared](#) national and European glorification (alongside national and European attachment) in a survey conducted in Hungary. We identified important differences between national and European attachments. Specifically, those with high national attachment held more negative attitudes toward immigrants and Muslim individuals than those with high European identity. This difference suggested that the values and content attached to a group can increase or

decrease intergroup hostility. However, we also found that European glorification likewise predicted both anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim attitudes. The fact that national and European glorification were both predictors of hostility suggests that besides the importance of values attached to a group with which we identify, the specific mode of identification (i.e., attachment vs. glorification) can override the inclusive values of a group and itself become a source of hostility and conflict. When right-wing populist politicians put ingroup greatness at the center of their politics, their support thrives on intergroup conflict and the crises created by these tensions.

Threat and Moral Exclusion

Beyond emphasizing the greatness of the ingroup, populist politicians also aim to influence the perception of outgroups (i.e., groups to which we compare ourselves) to increase their own support. A glorified ingroup image is in need of constant defending from external and internal threats. When outgroups—either minorities or external groups—[are presented as threatening](#), it contributes to ingroup loyalty and support for authoritarian leadership; simultaneously, it increases intergroup tensions and conflict. For example, [a study](#) conducted in Slovakia showed that experiencing a cultural threat to one's identity was a more important predictor of anti-refugee attitudes than racism. Outgroups perceived as threatening can become the subjects of various forms of hostility because any expression of hate toward them is considered an appropriate defense against that perceived threat. For example, dehumanizing rhetoric and inhumane treatment of refugees [are justified as a proportional response](#) to the perceived threat of migration.

Importantly, intergroup prejudice is not simply an expression of intergroup threat. Instead, it is a [strategic element of ingroup identity](#), as it defines acceptable and unacceptable forms of hostility. For example, after centuries of co-habitation, Roma people continue to be treated as second-class citizens in most countries of East-Central Europe and to be discriminated against in all areas of social life, treatment that is implicitly sanctioned by the authorities and [supported by dominant social norms](#). General anti-immigrant attitudes are highest in East-Central Europe, despite the low number of immigrants in these countries (Schlueter et al., 2020), supporting the notion that threat has more to do with experiences within one's ingroup than with the outgroup.

Political discourse has the potential to create the basis of moral exclusion. [Moral exclusion](#) refers to the tendency to draw a line between those who deserve fair treatment and those who do not. Importantly, hostile, aggressive, discriminatory, and inhumane behaviors do not necessarily count as immoral if directed against morally excluded individuals or group

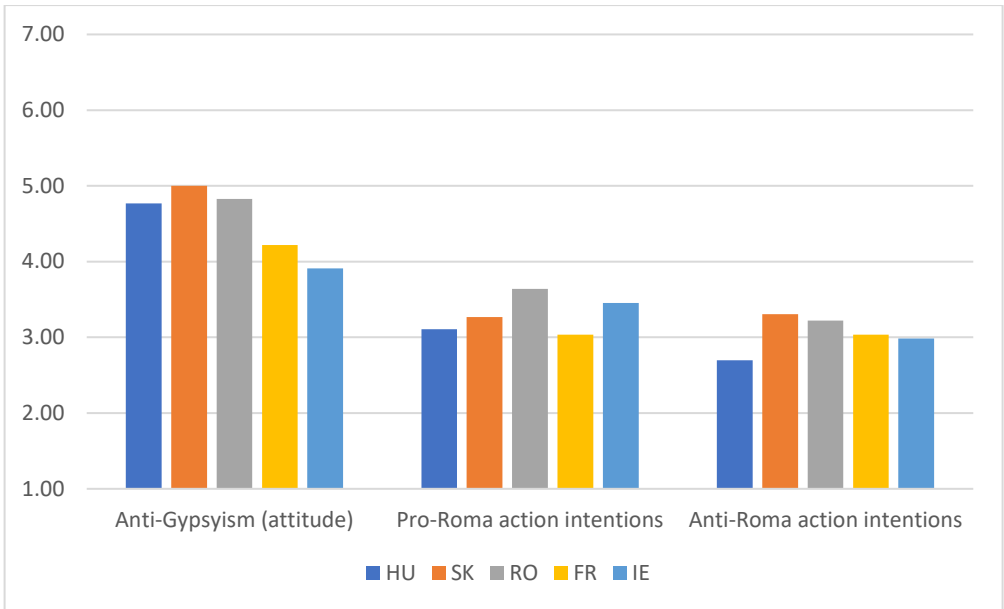
members, and one can still have a positive self-concept as being a good and moral person. Politicians sometimes deliberately use language that [leads to](#) the moral exclusion of some groups in line with an ideology or tradition—or simply for short-term political gain.

Political discourse regarding the Roma, Europe's largest ethnic minority group, is almost unanimously negative in all countries, and not just in the countries of East-Central Europe, where most of the Roma population live. It is dominated by hostile, discriminatory, and dehumanizing language. Politicians depict the Roma as a financial burden on society with a culture of criminality, reinforcing the idea that Roma people are a [threat to the ingroup](#). Mainstream political discourse often [employs dehumanizing language](#) that positions the Roma outside our moral considerations. These openly hostile messages normalize the moral exclusion of Roma people, which in turn justifies their negative treatment and discrimination.

However, political discourse does not need to be overtly hostile in order to maintain structural inequalities and discrimination. Social hierarchies are often maintained through more subtle and even seemingly positive acts that are more socially acceptable. For example, when liberal or left-wing politicians make statements of exclusion, they often [employ a disclaimer](#) to reinforce their positive ingroup image, such as stating their tolerance or egalitarianism, a move that also serves to legitimize their message. Furthermore, messages are not always positive or negative merely because they facilitate either positive or hostile behaviors. In fact, political discourse can promote positive and helpful behavior while also solidifying unequal status relations. This is reflected in the patronizing [language of "Roma inclusion."](#) [This seemingly positive discourse](#) argues for helping the Roma while denying their structural oppression. Paradoxically, when it comes to Roma people, this type of paternalistic political discourse that does not aim for social change may be the only one promoting deservingness and, consequently, moral inclusion.

In a survey conducted in five European countries (Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, France, and Ireland) with large, representative online samples, we investigated how different types of political discourse promote pro- or anti-Roma action intentions by creating a sense of moral inclusion or exclusion (for more details about the project, see www.polrom.eu). Overall, we found very low intentions to either engage in anti-Roma action (i.e., openly hostile, racist action) or pro-Roma action (i.e., making donations or engaging in political actions against discrimination). It seems that indifference (identified by scoring around the midpoint on a scale of anti-Gypsyism as an attitude), rather than explicit hate, was the most common response of individuals, both in terms of attitudes and actions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Attitudes in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, France, and Ireland



Means of anti-Gypsyism as an attitude and pro-Roma and anti-Roma action intentions, measured in 5 countries on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree with statements of the scale, 4 being the mid-point of the scale).

We could identify a positive connection between acceptance of paternalistic political discourse and pro-social intentions toward the Roma, and indeed this connection was mediated by moral inclusion. This statistical connection suggests that paternalistic discourse creates a norm through which Roma people are included in the moral ingroup and therefore deserve fair treatment and help. Those who found paternalistic political discourse acceptable were also more willing to offer some form of help. The findings indicate that paternalistic discourses may not be sufficient to promote social change, but they promote moral inclusion, which is the first step toward fair treatment and justice.

Importantly, across all samples, we found no evidence that acceptance of hostile discourse predicted lower intentions to engage in pro-Roma action or higher intentions to engage in anti-Roma action. Based on our findings, we can suggest that this type of speech does not directly mobilize the general population for action. The relevance of this finding is that anti-Gypsyism in many East-Central European countries has become an [arena](#)

[for political mobilization](#) by (extreme) right-wing political parties. However, it seems that finding hostile political speeches acceptable is not sufficient to prompt individuals either to engage in overtly racist action or to withhold help from the Roma. That being said, hostile political messages are not harmless: those who found hostile political discourse acceptable were more likely to accept the moral exclusion of Roma people.

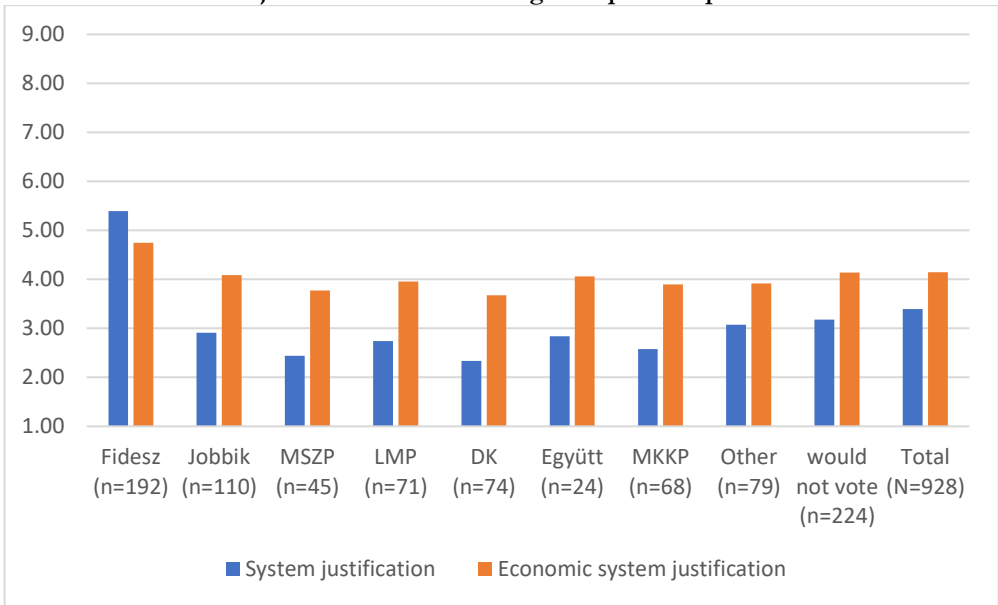
System Justification

For those directly benefitting from unequal and unjust social systems, supporting these systems has psychological benefits (e.g., lower feelings of guilt); this is a well-known and well-documented motivational process. However, for disadvantaged groups, the psychological benefits of supporting unequal social systems are less straightforward. System justification theory [suggests](#) that there is a motivational tendency to defend and justify the legitimacy of existing social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements, and this motivational tendency may be especially strong among marginalized and disadvantaged members of a society.

Unjust systems are defended by their principal victims because this justifies everyday cooperation with the system and passivity. It also follows that system justification is associated with support for the social and political status quo and cognitive rigidity. [Cognitive rigidity](#) refers to a need for simplicity, structure, closure, and order, all of which are more common in right-wing, conservative ideologies. In sum, system justification has a palliative function for victims of unjust and unstable social structures; high system justification creates support for right-wing conservatism through cognitive rigidity, making disadvantaged minority groups prone to supporting illiberalism, as shown, for example, by the overwhelming [support for Fidesz among Roma people](#) in the 2022 elections in Hungary. Therefore, in illiberal contexts, high system justification can be a way of coping with an unjust and unpredictable society, even as it contributes to the maintenance of structural inequalities, social conflicts, and illiberalism.

Using representative online survey data from Hungary, [we investigated](#) the levels of system justification and their connection with cognitive rigidity and political party support in 2014 and 2017. Although in both studies we found that overall, endorsement of system justification beliefs was somewhat below the mid-point, such beliefs were more strongly supported by right-wing respondents—and especially by Fidesz voters—than by left-wing voters and those in the opposition (see Figure 2). Moreover, we found that cognitive rigidity, system justification, and right-wing political orientation were all positively associated, and political orientation was a strong predictor of both cognitive rigidity and system justification.

Figure 2. Levels of system justification and economic system justification across Hungarian political parties



Means of general and economic system justification from a representative survey conducted in 2017 (see [Jost & Kende, 2020](#)). Both variables were measured on a 9-point scale (1=completely disagree, 9=completely agree, midpoint of the scale is 5). Party explanations: Fidesz: right-wing party in government, Jobbik: extreme right-wing party in opposition, all other parties are in opposition and positioned at the center or on the left wing of the political spectrum).

In Hungary, as in other former socialist states, conservative attitudes are often connected not only to cognitive rigidity and a fear of change, but also—building on the socialist nostalgia for a strong state—to the idea that powerful authorities should “take care” of citizens (which also explains why economic liberalism is alien to supporters of right-wing and conservative parties). This gives rise to leaders who aim to appear as [“entrepreneurs of identity”](#): they depict themselves as representing the experiences of their followers, in the process exploiting their fears, which are often instilled by political propaganda. Therefore, right-wing political orientation, the need for a strong leader, and support for Fidesz are sources of cognitive rigidity and the psychological need to support an illiberal political regime, and, simultaneously, the outcome of the psychological response to experiencing structural disadvantages.

Conclusions

Illiberal political systems are not psychologically inevitable. At the same time, nor do they require unique and exceptional psychological conditions. This paper has shown that proneness to illiberalism cannot be explained solely by ad hoc political processes; it is embedded in normal psychological responses to (a long history of) instability and in the collective memory of historical experiences of injustices experienced within and between societies. Support for leaders building illiberal regimes is based on people's genuine need to control situations that are unpredictable and unjust, to find comfort in the face of threat, and to build a positive self-concept. Recognizing the psychological needs that are used and exploited for political mobilization may take us a step closer to identifying ways to satisfy these needs outside illiberalism.

BIOGRAPHIES

Achtelik, Kirsten, sociologist and political scientist, journalist and author of *Selbstbestimmte Norm. Feminismus, Pränataldiagnostik, Abtreibung* (*Self-defined norm – Feminism, prenatal diagnostics, abortion*, 2015). They writes about gender, feminism, disability, biopolitics and public health.

Balogh, Lídia, PhD, research fellow at the Department of Legal Theory, the Sociology of Law and the History of Law, Institute for Legal Studies at the Centre for Social Sciences in Budapest, Hungary. She is also a visiting lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences, ELTE University, Budapest.

Bender, Felix, PhD, lecturer in Politics at Northumbria University. His research focuses on the political theory of refugeehood and migration.

Biskamp, Floris, PhD, sociologist and political scientist at the Center for Flight and Migration at the Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt and post-doctoral fellow at the Graduate Program for Right-Wing-Populist Social Policy at University of Tübingen. His main research Interests are the far right, racism, anti-semitism, memory culture, political theory and political economy.

Brand, Ulrich, Dr. phil., political scientist at the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna. His main research interests are the crisis of liberal globalisation, global environmental politics, Latin America and imperial mode of living.

Breiding, Malte, PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science at Lund University, Sweden, specializing in global queer politics and political theory. He is currently doing research on agonistic political theory as a normative theory of European integration in order to think the legitimacy of the EU's supranational promotion of LGBT equality in times of anti-gender mobilizations and politics.

Budgeon, Shelley, PhD, honorary associate professor, at the University of Birmingham specialising in gender and feminist theory. Her research analyses the impact of various social changes on gender relations and the performance of gendered identities and encompasses theories of gendered

subjectivity, feminist politics and the intersection of gender, postfeminism and neoliberalism.

Chrobak, John, research program coordinator for the Illiberalism Studies Program. He has an MA in International Affairs from GW's Elliott School of International Affairs.

Ekis Ekman, Kajsa, writer and literary critic at the Swedish major daily *Aftonbladet*, author of *Being and Being Bought – Prostitution, Surrogacy and the Split Self* (2014), *Stolen Spring – On the Eurocrisis seen from Athens* (in Greek, 2013) and *On the Meaning of Sex – Thoughts on the New Definition of Woman* (2023).

Grzyb, Magdalena, PhD, Criminology Department, Faculty of Law and Administration, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. Research interests: violence against women, criminal policy.

Hennig, Anja, PhD, political scientist at European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder); her research focuses on comparative (illiberal) morality politics and religion, anti-gender campaigns, memory politics, and on Polish-German relations.

Hesová, Zora, PhD, is a lecturer at the Department for Political Science at Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. She works on politics and religion in Central and Eastern Europe. With Ondřej Slačálek and Pavel Barša, she published the volume [*Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism and Populism*](#) (2021).

Horváth, Szilvia, PhD, research fellow at the Institute of Political Science, ELTE University, Budapest, Hungary. Her main research interest is the political theory of agonism.

Kahlina, Katja, PhD, senior researcher, Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki. She is the principal investigator of the research project *Sexuality and democracy: Exploring the links and re-thinking the concepts for feminist politics* ([SEXDEM](#)).

Kende, Anna, PhD, social psychologist, professor at the Institute of Psychology of ELTE University, Budapest, Hungary. Her main research interests are intergroup conflicts, prejudice, political action, and intergroup solidarity with disadvantaged groups. She has recently edited a book with Barbara Láštiová entitled *The Psychology of Politically Unstable Societies* (forthcoming Routledge, 2023).

Kóczé, Angéla, PhD, sociologist, Chair of Romani Studies Program and Academic Director of the Roma Graduate Preparation Program at Central European University, Vienna and Budapest. She has published several peer-

reviewed articles, book chapters, and edited books with various publishers, including Palgrave Macmillan, Ashgate, Routledge, Berghahn and CEU Press.

Kováts, Eszter, PhD, political scientist, assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna, Austria. Her book *Genderőrületek Németországban és Magyarországon* (Gender madnesses in Germany and Hungary) was awarded the prize “the best book in political science in 2022” by the Hungarian Association of Political Science. During the period of the compilation of this series she was a non-resident associate fellow at the Illiberalism Studies Program at George Washington University.

Kremmler, Katrin, PhD candidate at the Institute of European Ethnology, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany; research and teaching associate at the Department of Cultural Anthropology / European Ethnology, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany.

Kuhar, Roman, PhD, sociologist, professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Land, Thomas, associated PhD candidate at the Max-Weber-Kolleg, Erfurt, Germany. Historian, philosopher and social scientist. His research interests include social philosophy, political theory, history of bourgeois society and analytical theories of history.

Laruelle, Marlène, Ph.D., is Director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies; Director of the Central Asia Program; Director of the Illiberalism Studies Program; Co-Director of PONARS Eurasia; and Research Professor of International Affairs at The George Washington University. She works on political, social, and cultural changes in the post-Soviet space. Marlène's research explores the transformations of nationalist and conservative ideologies in Russia, nationhood construction in Central Asia, as well as the development of Russia's Arctic regions.

Maďarová, Zuzana, PhD, researcher at the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava. Her research focuses on the gender aspects of political subjectivity (present and past), feminist approaches in political sciences, and the neoconservative turn in political discourse.

Mayer, Stefanie, PhD, political scientist and researcher at the Institute of Conflict Research (IKF), Vienna, Austria. Her main research interests are critical investigations of anti-feminisms and right-wing gender politics as well as feminist activism and theorising. With Judith Goetz she is editing a volume on [*Global Perspectives on Anti-feminism*](#) (forthcoming in September 2023).

Nicolini, Marie, MD PhD, psychiatrist and ethicist, is incoming assistant professor of Psychiatry at UT Southwestern, Dallas where she will lead her lab in the ethics of neuroscience and mental health. A former postdoctoral fellow in bioethics at the U.S. National Institutes of Health, she has testified as an expert witness to the Canadian Parliament on the issue of assisted death for mental disorders.

Nógrádi, Noá, PhD, political philosopher and women's rights expert. In the former discipline, her primary areas are global justice theory and gender/sex-based (in)justice; in the latter capacity, she focuses on violence and harassment against women and girls. At the time of writing the contribution to this volume, she was exiting the NGO/CSO field after a decade of intensive activism and advocacy.

Patakfalvi-Czirják, Ágnes, PhD, sociologist–social anthropologist, assistant professor at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Hungary, and former postdoctoral fellow at the research project [“Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe”](#). Her main research interests are contemporary nationalism and ethnic relations in CEE, popular music studies and nationhood.

Perinelli, Massimo, PhD, historian, senior adviser of migration at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. Until 2015, he was a researcher on sexuality and film at the University of Cologne. He is co-editor, with Lydia Lierke, of the anthology *Erinnern stören – Der Mauerfall aus migrantischer und jüdischer Perspektive* (2020) and with Mia Neuhaus and Lucas Mielke of the anthology *Solidarität – eine reale Utopie* (2023).

Petersen, Hans-Christian, PhD, is a research associate at the Federal Institute for Culture and History of the Germans in Eastern Europe, Germany. His main research interests are post-Soviet migration, Russian German history, (post)colonialism and racism as well as urban history. Together with Jannis Panagiotidis (Vienna), he is writing a monograph on anti-Eastern European and anti-Slavic racism (forthcoming in early 2024).

Réz, Anna, PhD, philosopher, assistant professor at ELTE University, Budapest, Hungary. Her main research areas are moral psychology, theories of emotions, normative and applied ethics, feminist philosophy. Recent book publication: *Racked – Nine Chapters on Guilt* (2022) (in Hungarian).

Sauer, Birgit, PhD, political scientist, professor emerita at the Department of Political Science, University of Vienna. Her main research interests are gender and right-wing populism; emotion, affect and politics. Recent book publication: Birgit Sauer and Otto Penz: *Konjunktur der Männlichkeit. Affektive Strategien der autoritären Rechten*, Frankfurt: Campus 2023.

Slačálek, Ondřej, PhD, works in the Department of Political Science in the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague. With Zora Hesová and Pavel Barša he edited the volume [*Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism and Populism*](#) (2021) and with Ágnes Gagyí [*The Political Economy of Eastern Europe 30 Years into the "Transition": New Left Perspectives from the Region*](#) (2022).

Scheiring, Gábor, PhD, is an incoming assistant professor of comparative politics at Georgetown University Qatar. He studies how economic shocks get under our skin causing despair and health inequalities, and what this portends for the future of democracy and capitalism. In a previous life, he was a social organizer and MP in Hungary working on a socially just transition to sustainability.

Schubert, Karsten, PhD, political theorist and social philosopher, Associate Fellow at the Political Theory Unit of Humboldt-University Berlin. His work focuses on radical democracy, Michel Foucault, queer and gay male theory, legal critique, and intersectionality. Currently, he researches at the intersection of radical democratic thought and identity politics. Texts, videos, and current information available at www.karstenschubert.net

Soiland, Tove, PhD, historian and feminist theorist, worked as a lecturer at several German-speaking universities, most recently as a research assistant at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Her main focus lies in Lacanian Marxism. Last publication: T. Soiland, M. Frühauf, A. Hartmann (eds.): *Postödipale Gesellschaft* (vol. I) and *Sexuelle Differenz in der Postödipalen Gesellschaft* (vol. II).

Speck, Sarah, PhD, is professor of sociology at Goethe-University Frankfurt, Germany. She is deputy director of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and the Cornelia Goethe Centre for Women's Studies and the Study of Gender Relations. Her research focuses on the contradictory transformations of the gender order, critical theory and feminist social theory, the political economy of the 'private sphere' and political movements around the category of gender.

Suissa, Judith, PhD, is Professor of Philosophy of Education at UCL Institute of Education, UK. Her work explores the intersection between politics and education. She has written about radical education, parent-child relationships, and academic freedom. Her work includes *Anarchism and Education* (Routledge, 2006) and (with Stefan Ramaekers) *The Claims of Parenting* (Springer, 2012).

Sullivan, Alice, PhD, is Professor of Sociology at the UCL Social Research Institute. She is a quantitative social scientist with expertise in data collection

and analysis, and has published widely on questions relating to social, educational and health inequalities.

Swyngedouw, Erik, PhD, is professor of geography at the University of Manchester. He was previously professor of geography at Oxford University and held the Vincent Wright Visiting Professorship at Science Po, Paris. His research focuses on political ecology, critical theory, environmental politics, democratization, urbanization, urban governance, and socio-ecological movements.

Ulcuse, Magdalena, PhD, is an assistant professor of International Migration and Ethnic Relations at Malmo University, Sweden. Her research focuses on intra-EU mobility, migration and inequality, and the role of local policies in mediating the effects of e/im-migration.

Valkovičová, Veronika, PhD, is a post-doc researcher at the Institute for Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. Her research focuses on gender in organisations, and on feminist and LGBTIQ social movements.

Villa Braslavsky, Paula-Irene, PhD, sociologist with an emphasis in Gender Studies, professor and chair at the Sociology Department, LMU Munich. Since 2023 president of the German Sociological Association. Her research focuses on bio-/body politics, social theory, care and gender, gender in political mobilisation. Recent publication: *#metoo and Beyond. Perspectives on a Global Movement* (co-edited with Cristina Alcalde), University of Kentucky Press (2022).

Vuckovic Juros, Tanja, PhD, sociologist and an MSCA post-doctoral research fellow at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb, where she is conducting a project on how citizens interpret anti-gender messages in Croatia and Belgium. Her research is situated mostly at the intersections of cultural and political sociology, with a deep interest in families and sexualities.

Wissen, Markus, PhD, political scientist, professor at Berlin School of Economics and Law, fellow of the Institute for Critical Social Analysis of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

The culture war is a concept developed in the U.S. used to grasp the country's cultural polarization. As often with U.S. hegemony in academia, the concept has travelled to Europe. As other loaded concepts like populism and illiberalism, the notion of culture wars is often used not in analytical terms but in political debates to delegitimize the opponent. In this series published between May 2022 and May 2023 – now compiled as an e-book – we looked at some of the current cultural debates in Europe, such as race, LGBT, reproductive rights, cancel culture, woke, Covid-19, climate change, and take a reflexive stance at how they are morally loaded – both on the conservative and the so-called progressive side, both in political movements and discourses as well as in academia.

While we, scholars who initiated this project, also have our own positions in the addressed debates, we strive to provide a broad intellectual platform for different theoretical approaches. While we are aware that academia is embedded in society, including current power hegemonies, we believe that one can and should draw a line between academic knowledge production and social movements and politics. Where this line is to be drawn is subject to constant negotiations and the debate is not settled yet, nor will it probably ever be.



Culture Wars in Europe

Edited by Eszter Kovács