

# Mapping the movements against “gender ideology” across Europe

Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Eds):

## **Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality**

Rowman and Littlefield, London, 2017, pages 302. Price 41,95 \$ (paperback)

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Kuhar and Paternotte’s 2018 anthology maps the resistance across Europe to political and social movements relating to women’s equality and reproductive rights, anti-discrimination policies, LGBTQIA+ rights, sex education in schools, the academic field of gender studies, and “gender ideology” more broadly. In consolidating resistances against the aforementioned initiatives under an overarching umbrella of “anti-gender” movements, the editors demonstrate “how an academic concept such as gender [...] has become a mobilizing tool and the target of massive social movements” (16). In this way, “gender”, they argue, becomes an “empty signifier” (23) for anything that could be tied to gender theory that is perceived as a new and threatening danger to traditional national and family values. Moreover, “anti-gender” has become the “symbolic glue” binding together right-wing populist movements, the Catholic Church and other religious organizations, anti-gender “scholars”, and concerned citizens, who otherwise might have diverging goals, to work together against the larger threat of “gender ideology.”

The anthology focuses on the period starting in the mid-1990s after the first international conferences on gender equality took place in Beijing and Cairo (9), but especially draws attention to the mid-2000s when “gender ideology” policy initiatives (particularly same-sex marriage) started taking root in Europe. The book includes contributions looking specifically at the manifestations of anti-gender movements within the national contexts of 12 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Russia, Slovenia and Spain. Each chapter provides insights into the specific national contexts, recent political histories and traces the specific local mobilizations against “gender”. While there are national specificities in terms of the people/groups involved, national influence, international alliances, timing, involvement of religious institutions, and the specific aims of resistance movements (which are too technical to relate here), the authors contributions together show that there are some overarching guiding trends and principles. That is, there is “a shared discourse, a traveling repertoire of action

and similar strategies” (253). Specifically, anti-gender movements rely on a shared call of universal truths regarding the traditional family (and family values), sex, and reproduction.

In terms of shared strategies and truths, the anthology discusses at length how the Catholic Church, anti-gender “scholars” and Far-right figures from both other European countries and the U.S. have come together and developed new strategies of mobilization in protecting traditional family values, and the “natural” essentialist gendered order. Indeed, the introduction to the book relates the overall political weight the Catholic Church has historically held within Europe, and also shows the Church’s role in coining the negatively connotated “gender ideology” (appropriated from gender theory), and the subsequent spread of the term across Europe. The different contributions from the contributing authors engage in-depth with the role of the Church in each country’s anti-gender movement.

While the prevalence and role of the Church is different in each national context (i.e. stronger in Croatia, Italy, and Poland, and weaker in states like Belgium, Germany, Slovenia, and Spain), the authors show that the more moral and political authority the Catholic Church has within a given context, the more visible it is within anti-gender initiatives (267).

Interestingly, the contributors also show how anti-gender figures and work from one country has helped influence movements in other countries. For example, the work of Manif pour Tous in France has been used by figures in other countries like Italy to try to spark local satellite movements in their own national context, translating and using the French material and strategies in Italy (151). Though the authors clearly trace the transnational spread and dissemination of anti-gender initiatives and knowledge production, on the other hand, the contributors also demonstrate how rhetoric in local anti-gender campaigns relies on the overall notion of “gender” as something imported, “foreign” and forced upon people from political elites (14, 33). In this clever move, movements position the traditional family, heterosexuality, and essentialist gender-roles, children and themselves as victims of gender ideology.

Moreover, by pushing back against ideas of national anti-gender movements as an isolated

occurrence happening only within a particular national context, (4, 271), Kuhar and Paternotte’s anthology demonstrates that anti-gender movements are part of a larger transnational trend. Furthermore, in teasing out these transnational trends, the book does an excellent job of not only capturing how anti-gender discourse has circulated, but also how anti-gender campaigns have often also been linked with other populist movements, for example, that of racial prejudices, xenophobia, and particularly anti-Islam movements.

Lastly, in the comparative analysis Kuhar and Paternotte, draw attention to the fact that there is no defining trend between Eastern and Western European countries. Dismissing East/West dichotomies draws more attention to the pervasiveness and interconnectedness of such movements across not only Europe, but also Latin America and North America (253).

Kuhar and Paternotte also draw attention to the fact that while LGBT rights was one of the main areas attacked by anti-gender activists, transgender rights in particular were generally left untouched (257). This leaves me with questions about *why* trans rights have remained a peripheral concern to anti-gender advocates, and more largely how and to what extent transgender rights within each individual country’s context are framed and discussed.

Reviewing this work for a Danish feminist journal, this anthology furthermore leaves me with questions about the national and/or regional specificities of anti-gender movements within the Nordic countries (which were not included in this anthology), especially when taking into consideration the uniqueness of the Nordic Welfare State models and ties to Lutheranism rather than Catholicism.

Overall, this book is an important contribution and very relevant work to read for anyone working with contemporary European populist movements within history and the social sciences, as well as anyone working within feminist/gender studies in Europe as it not only helps shed light on the kinds of resistance feminist knowledge production and initiatives are facing, but also demonstrates that anti-gender movements are not at all anomalous national phenomenon, but rather a part of an intricate web of global actors.