

Gender Ideology and the Crisis of Care in Poland

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Across Europe and beyond, actors on the nationalist right are instrumentalising the concept of gender for their own political gains. In Poland the incumbent right-wing Law and Justice party, backed by the Catholic Church, demonised LGBT organisations in its recent successful electoral campaign. Adam Ostolski spoke to feminist activist and scholar Agnieszka Graff about why gender politics have become central to Polish politics, taking a step back to analyse how the Right's scapegoating of gender is a response to the same set of social issues that the Left attributes to neoliberalism, in particular the crisis of care.

Adam Ostolski: Gender politics were central to the recent electoral campaign in Poland – thanks to the nationalist Right. As a long-time feminist activist, what do you make of this?

Agnieszka Graff: Gender, in which I would include LGBT and women's rights, has been discovered by the Right as a mobilising strategy. Law and Justice (PiS) have taken the idea of "gender ideology" from religious right-wing networks. They demonised the idea of gender in their electoral campaign. And this, at least partly, is what got them into power. Four years ago, refugees were the focus but this time it was 'LGBT ideology'. Just three days before polling day, the public broadcaster showed the pseudo-documentary *Inwazja* (Invasion), denouncing presumably foreign-funded LGBT organisations as a threat to Polish identity and sovereignty. The dynamic was the same as with refugees in 2015. The Left and the liberal centre are struggling to catch up.

In what way is the opposition struggling with gender and LGBT issues?

The mainstream opposition sees LGBT rights as part of Western civilisation. That gay rights are human rights is on the agenda just like women's rights are human rights was part of the agenda in the 1990s, if with a certain hesitation. The message is: we respect LGBT people as human beings, we respect their right to demonstrate their views, but we would never go so far as to allow full citizenship, or what they would call "marriage privileges." At times in this year's electoral campaign, female politicians were used very conservatively by the [liberal-conservative party] Civic Platform. The image of Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska, Civic Platform's candidate for Prime Minister, as a peace-making woman could be seen on posters all around Poland on which she was depicted hugging another woman and looking blissfully non-political. The slogan was "Cooperation, no quarrels."

Hardly a mobilising message...

An emotional, feel-good image that could work as promotion for a soap opera, but not for a large political coalition getting ready to struggle against an authoritarian government. Civic Platform is hopelessly confused as to what gender means and does in politics. They've caught on to its importance, but they don't know how it works.

The Civic Platform's policy platform supported civil unions but the accompanying image was that of a straight couple. Regarding women's rights, there was some understanding of the need for accessible contraception but not abortion. (1) Do you think its message was confused?

Abortion is out of the question. Civic Platform still defends the legal status quo despite polling showing that 53 per cent of Polish people want the law to be more liberal. They are, as always, more conservative than the population.

What about *Lewica*, the coalition of left-wing parties? Are you satisfied with their position on gender issues?

The Left did not prioritise it enough. Their whole campaign was basically about economics. Gender equality and LGBT rights were there somewhere in their programme but pretty far towards the end.

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Perhaps they were trying to attract PiS voters? A recent study by Przemysław Sadura and Sławomir Sierakowski shows that PiS's grip on power depends on a group of reluctant supporters that support social transfers but that are not necessarily on board with the conservative message, for now.

So the Left emphasised social justice and economic redistribution and downplayed the so-called cultural issues? Wouldn't the correct strategy to win those people be to make them feel even more uncomfortable about PiS's exclusionary gender politics? There is a lingering reluctance on the Left and the liberal centre to take gender seriously. They don't think that this is where politics is. Whereas the Right has discovered that, yes, this is where politics is because it is where powerful social emotions are located.

How does PiS use gender politics then?

They are playing two things at the same time: the polarisation game and the right-wing use of gender as a synonym for chaos and instability, as well as for the colonisation of Poland by the West. They did it before and they have done it again. Scapegoating is part of it. In 2015 they targeted a general category of 'genderists' that included sex educators, feminists, and LGBT activists. Now the term 'gender ideology' has been replaced by 'LGBT ideology', which has some of the same elements but more obviously targets minorities. PiS is looking to achieve is a clear demarcation between 'us' and 'them' that can mobilise their electorate through a sense of anxiety, fear, and moral superiority. It is the classic populist move of polarising and moralising the political scene. Political opponents become not just people who have different views but enemies, and enemies of humanity at that. Enemies of the family and a threat to children – these are the key charges.

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What is different to 2015 is an effort to mark the opposition with the stigma of homosexuality. To do this, they are encouraging Polish homophobia. Whether homophobia is growing in Poland is controversial. Some studies show a persistent move towards acceptance over the last 10 years with more people claiming that they know gay people and so on. But other studies show that acceptance has recently fallen. So maybe PiS's strategy has been successful.

After Rafał Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw, signed the LGBT charter, PiS seized the opportunity as an excuse

to brand their political opponents as gay. They are now playing the socially dangerous game of stigmatising a minority. But it's not the minority that they're after, it's the stigma. PiS want leaders of the European coalition opposition to seem like queers, not the queers themselves. They are not actually that interested in queers, just in creating a general sense that there is something queer about the opposition. For those for whom the essence of politics is men being real men, branding one side as fishy, as something that arouses distrust, if not disgust, can actually work.

In your work, you have argued that the concept of gender ideology or LGBT ideology is better understood in a postcolonial framework. Isn't it also possible to see anti-gender mobilisations as a “symbolic glue” for anti-neoliberalism?

It's both and they are interconnected. The claim that Elżbieta Korolczuk and I have made, in an article called [Ebola from Brussels](#) (a slogan we saw at a right-wing anti-gender rally), is that the focus on gender is superseded by a broader idea of Western domination over the East and of financial elites over ordinary people. The two occur simultaneously. In other words, you have the evil elites, who are sometimes but not necessarily associated with Jews and include the UN, the World Health Organization, pharmaceutical companies, Bill and Melinda Gates... and [George] Soros, of course, is a key player. These rich and powerful Western elites are seen as the evil brains behind it all that have manipulated the masses. These ordinary people are associated with Eastern Europe but also, interestingly, with Africa. In some renditions of this anti-gender discourse, it is Africa that is being colonised by genderism.

We believe that this idea is basically ultraconservative language for resistance to late capitalism. They would not use the words 'capitalism' or 'neoliberalism' but they're using the term 'gender' to refer to many of the same problems that the Left calls neoliberalism: the dissolution of the welfare state and the complete failure of states to redistribute and deliver social justice. From their point of view, the most important aspect is the dissolution of traditional emotional and economic bonds based on family. This dissolution can be seen in high divorce rates, the fact that the elderly in the West are no longer cared for by their children, and, more generally, the fact that care has become a business rather than a matter of course.

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Gender is the moralistic term the Right uses for these major problems of neoliberalism: the financialisation of care and the care crisis. All the stuff that we call neoliberalism, they call gender. We use the language of economics and political theory to describe this predicament; they use the language of theology and morals. But we are reacting to the same reality.

Andrea Pető, Eszter Kováts, and others have used the term “[symbolic glue](#)” to pinpoint the way opposition to gender allows various brands of conservatives to get together. For example, nationalists from different countries who didn't normally collaborate now get on quite well. In the 1980s, there was not an international coalition of nationalists. Other people, who you'd expect to be universalists, such as religious fundamentalists – are now willing to collaborate with the far right, despite its xenophobia. This narrative about the evils of gender is the symbolic glue that has brought them together. But if you replace gender with neoliberalism you will find, and it can be frightening, that you agree with them on a lot of issues.

Nancy Fraser describes the phenomenon of “progressive neoliberalism” whereby advances in women's and minority rights go in hand with the curbing of social rights.

Nancy Fraser went further than saying that these are parallel processes. She explains the “elective affinity” between the two. Several left-wing feminist scholars make this argument and some blame feminists more straightforwardly than others. Hester Eisenstein, in *Feminism Seduced*, blames Western and especially American feminists for allowing neoliberal solutions to replace emancipation. The free market posing as freedom for women. Fraser is more subtle, but she suggests the same thing. The discourse of anti-genderism goes a step further. It skips the neoliberalism part and says that it’s just feminism. Feminism destroyed the family, feminism destroyed women’s lives, and it destroyed the place of women in society. But the real problem lies in the failure of modern feminism to take the crisis of care seriously.

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There is enormous resistance to this argument. When I wrote *Mother and Feminist*, I was accused of abandoning feminism and becoming conservative. What I was actually touching on is this very dilemma. For women for whom neoliberal emancipation is simply not an option because they have many kids and no skills allowing them to advance professionally, feminism is a curse and not a solution. Feminism solved a number of issues but not the issue of care. It insufficiently addressed the problem of what you do with your baby or with your ageing mother when you go to work. It’s as simple as that.

The gender politics of PiS is not just a cultural mobilisation against gender. It is also a set of policies in the economic sphere. The 500+ universal family allowance has empowered many women in the labour market. (2) The reduction of retirement age, which understandably was criticised by many feminists, was welcomed by most women as a liberating measure. What I see is a government effort to disarticulate the connection between women’s social and liberal rights: to treat the liberal rights like abortion or contraception as a plague, while guaranteeing social rights within the framework of family and nation.

This is what it looks like from a left wing perspective, one that includes both values: redistribution issues, which you called social issues, and choice, freedom of self-determination. But from the ultra-conservative perspective, individual choice is not a value, it is itself the problem. Women are treated as deserving of recognition and redistribution and the 500+ universal allowance is both. It is not a coincidence that it goes to people who have children. It is paying for the effort of giving care, of taking care of future citizens. It’s not just a calculation that women will have more kids if you pay them. People read it, and I read it myself, as finally someone treating care as labour that deserves to be paid for.

Gender has become an important political dividing line and this does not fare well for future generations.

But, within the moral universe of the Right, this recognition is due only in the context where having a child is not a choice. Women should be rewarded for their sacrifice to society because it is part of the natural order. This is what women are. They are not individuals who decide to have children. They are members of society whose bodies are the property of that society. Within this view, it makes perfect sense to do both: to ban abortion and limit access to contraception and to give money to women who have children. They receive this money because they’re not free to

choose. That's the philosophy behind it.

Recently, we are seeing a growing mobilisation on both the Right and on the progressive side. The huge pro-choice Black Protests mobilised more women than the feminist movement ever had before. The same with the LGBT movement. Five years ago, equality marches were organised in a few big cities. In 2019, there will be at least 30 of them. What is going on, in your view?

The easy way to frame it is to say that this is a cultural war around the agenda that has been dictated in part by changes in the West such as the introduction of gay marriage in the last decade, as well as by the Right's hostile takeover of the term 'gender'. But I prefer to think about it as a strange divergence between young women and young men, because both sides of this culture war are predominantly young. On the progressive side, there is a majority of women and, on the reactionary side, it's mainly men. Statistics concerning political choices and sympathies are in line with this observation. Over a third of young men declare their willingness to vote for the Right and far right. Over a third of young women claim that they want to vote for the Left. In the centre you have white middle-aged and older people. Poland is no exception in this regard – the same thing is happening in the United States : the sympathisers of the alt-right are predominantly young men and the most active people on the progressive side and in the climate movement are young women.

Gender has become an important political dividing line and this does not fare well for future generations, if I can crack a joke at this juncture. Or at least for heterosexual marriages, because you can imagine happy male couples on the ultra-right and happy lesbian couples on the Left.

What about the Catholic Church? Part of the explanation for PiS's anti-LGBT stance is that they wanted to defend the church from the odium of child-abuse scandals.

Or that they used the child abuse scandal to exert pressure and enlist the church into their camp. We need to look at what PiS is doing with the church, but also at what the church is doing with PiS. The church has completely lost its way in Poland.

I don't believe the narrative that holds that the church used to be progressive and pro-democratic before it suddenly swerved right. There has always been a strong nationalist core to the Polish church, but there was also a healthy attitude to deal with politicians of all parties throughout the 1990s, depending on who was in power. Now the church is completely enlisted in the ranks of the populist right. This is not just morally wrong. It is a grave strategic mistake. Because when PiS loses, the church will lose too.

The image of the church is tarnished. Last year the film *Clergy*, which addresses issues such as child abuse, corruption and alcoholism in the Catholic Church in Poland, was seen by over 5 million people, making it the third most-watched Polish film since 1989. This spring, the documentary *Don't tell anyone* by the Siekielski brothers gave visibility to people who were abused by priests in their childhood. Why didn't this translate into a loss of support for PiS?

Somehow PiS voters were able to disaggregate their support for PiS and their diminishing support for the church. I used to think that Poland was like Ireland. But now I increasingly think that we're like Italy. There has yet to be an outbreak of paedophilia scandals in Italy. Frankly, I suspect that this has something to do with the willingness on the part of a lot of people to sweep them under the carpet. Not just because they are willing to forgive the church in return for social services such as a beautiful wedding or a beautiful christening, but also because they are – and I say this with heartbreak – they are willing to sacrifice the children: "Life is tough, life is sometimes disgusting, shit happens. Let's not talk about it." In Poland, there is a level of resignation in response to the molested child. It's just one more awful thing in an awful life in general, in the sea of injustice. I keep waiting for rage and it does not happen...

Are there any grounds for hope?

For hope? Always. The Black Protests, of course. Maybe not the protests themselves because their energy seems to have burned itself out. But the young women, the high school girls, for whom this was their first political experience and whose lives were changed, are now entering the stage when you become politically active, when you vote and become engaged. This new generation of women, and there must be hundreds of thousands of them, are going to make a difference. That's my hope.

1. Poland has some of the most restrictive laws on abortion in Europe, and government-backed proposals to introduce a total ban on abortion in 2016 were abandoned only after mass protests. For more on this, see this [interview](#).

2. The 'Family 500+' programme, implemented in April 2016, guaranteed 500 Polish złoty/month (approx. 120 euros) for each second and subsequent child in the family and the same amount for the first child in low-income families. As of July 2019, the benefit has been made fully universal for all children aged 0-17.



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