

## **“No Longer the Alexanders, the Napoleons, or the Attilas”: Gender, Illiberalism, and Quiet Resistance**

Article by Andrea Petó

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Until recently, few regarded Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) as a significant voice in political engagement. His work, written in the context of gathering war and the rise of fascism, chronicles the familiar sensation of watching the world descend into chaos and feeling powerless to stop it. However, beneath these observations lies a nuanced perspective on the intellectual response to systemic collapse that offers unexpected insights to those facing similar challenges today.

“There is less sleep in the world today; longer are the nights and longer the days.”<sup>1</sup> Written by Stefan Zweig in 1914, these words are no less relevant now. Born into a cultured Jewish family in Vienna, the capital of multi-ethnic Austria-Hungary, Zweig – one of the most widely translated writers of the 1920s and 1930s – was convinced of the importance of a united Europe, cultural exchange, free movement, respect, and tolerance. Both his despair over the growth of nationalism in Europe and fears for his own safety led to his emigration from Austria in 1934 – to the UK, the US, and finally Brazil – and eventually to his suicide eight years later.

In addition to his fiction work, Zweig is best known for his historical biographies, most notably on 16th-century humanist thinker and theologian Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536). Despite now being less famous than the EU scholarship programme named after him,<sup>2</sup> Erasmus led a remarkable life, which Zweig recounted in a text he completed in 1934 while living in his “Villa in Europa” in Salzburg.

It is no accident that Zweig focused on the life of Erasmus while looking for answers to his questions. Both were strong believers in a united Europe at a time of stark division and violence (due to two world wars and the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation, respectively) who strove to maintain human decency and to find a “middle way” – earning the contempt of both opposing sides. And both lived in a time when the knowledge production, sharing, and authorisation that underpinned their life’s work were threatened.

The parallels with today’s world are unmistakable. Within academia, the current landscape presents an unprecedented confluence of challenges as institutions of higher learning globally navigate a complex terrain marked by economic volatility, escalating geopolitical tensions, and conflicting policy paradigms posed by often overlapping neoliberal and illiberal frameworks.<sup>3</sup> This multidimensional crisis might aptly be characterised as academia’s “perfect storm” – a critical historical moment wherein multiple existential threats converge, fundamentally challenging the established foundations of higher education and scientific inquiry.

Within this turbulent environment, the core principles that have traditionally anchored academic institutions face increasing contestation, while established scientific methodologies and pedagogical approaches undergo intensified scrutiny. Simultaneously, public confidence in the intrinsic value of higher education continues to decline precipitously, accompanied by a persistent erosion of institutional

credibility that further undermines academia's societal standing and perceived relevance.

During this challenging time, the discipline of gender studies has become a clear target. Gender studies and women's studies programmes have been shut down in countries including the US, while in Hungary, gender studies was deleted from the accredited study list without explanation in 2018. Attacks on this interdisciplinary field of study<sup>5</sup> have become a central rhetorical tool of illiberal efforts to determine what "science" should mean for broader audiences, creating a new consensus on what should be seen as normalised, legitimate, and scientific.

### **“Gender ideology”**

It is no surprise that illiberal forces have focused on gender studies as part of their broader efforts to control knowledge creation and dissemination. Gender as a category occupies a significant symbolic position within the counter-hegemonic narrative advanced by such movements. Opposition to a constructed “gender ideology” functions as a mechanism for rejecting multiple aspects of the contemporary socio-economic order, encompassing identity politics and the human rights framework. The latter becomes an “empty signifier” deployed exclusively for political advantage. This rhetorical strategy presupposes the existence of a monolithic and uniform “gender agenda”, which is portrayed as both powerful and menacing.

However, this represents only one dimension of the complex discursive processes at work. Equally significant is illiberalism's strategic deployment of gender as a “symbolic glue” – a metaphorical construct that harnesses collective anxieties about societal transformation and redirects public attention towards specific social issues.

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In illiberal states, gender has been systematically operationalised as this “symbolic glue” through a two-phase discursive strategy: initially, diverse contested issues were consolidated under the generic classification of “the progressive agenda”. Subsequently, building upon a deliberately constructed perception of gender as inherently threatening, the notion of “gender ideology” was introduced to signify a purported threat to social stability.

This serves as a pivotal example of how language can be wielded in the service of political agendas. By framing gender as a fundamental threat, proponents of this idea seek to manipulate public perception, fostering an environment of fear and misunderstanding around issues of gender identity and equality.

For instance, consider the political discourse surrounding gender education in schools. Advocates of the anti-gender movement often assert that inclusive curricula, which aim to educate young people about diverse gender identities and expressions, undermine traditional family values and pose a danger to children's moral development. This narrative posits that accepting and acknowledging varied gender identities constitutes a radical imposition on societal norms. This development can be interpreted as a failure of democratic representation. The implication is that the democratic process, which ideally accommodates diverse viewpoints and fosters dialogue, has somehow failed by neglecting the voices of those asserting traditional gender norms.

### **Gender and democracy**

In fact, it is the anti-gender movement, which has gained traction in various parts of the globe, that poses a profound challenge to the tenets of democratic governance. Broadly defined, this movement opposes the recognition and promotion of gender equality and the rights of marginalised genders and sexualities, undermining the very foundations upon which liberal democracies are built: the principles of equality, inclusivity, and respect for individual rights.

At its core, the anti-gender movement posits a regressive ideology that seeks to reinforce traditional gender norms and hierarchies. By advocating for a narrow interpretation of gender, often tied to binary and biological determinism, this movement threatens to dismantle the progressive achievements that democratic societies have made regarding human rights and social justice. Such a stance not only denies the lived experiences and identities of individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles but also fosters an environment of intolerance and discrimination where the rights of marginalised groups are trivialised or actively opposed.

Moreover, the anti-gender movement's tactics often involve mobilising misinformation and fear, creating an atmosphere where individuals' rights are pitted against one another. This antagonistic rhetoric can lead to legislative measures that seek to roll back protections and rights entrenched in law and societal norms, eroding the principles of equality before the law and non-discrimination that are crucial to a functioning democracy. In this way, the movement challenges specific policies and seeks to delegitimise the processes of democratic deliberation that allow for diverse voices to be heard.

In addition, the anti-gender movement often collaborates with populist and far-right ideologies, which can exploit economic and social insecurities to gain political power. By framing their agenda as a defence of "traditional values", they cultivate a narrative that positions those advocating for gender rights as threats to societal cohesion rather than as constituents deserving of recognition and delegitimises their efforts. This tactic further polarises public opinion and stifles constructive dialogue, making it increasingly difficult to achieve consensus on democratic principles that accommodate diversity.

Finally, by resisting the inclusion of diverse gender identities and eroding the rights of marginalised groups, the anti-gender movement seeks to establish a monolithic view of society that is antithetical to democratic pluralism. To safeguard democracy, societies must recognise and counteract the ideologies that underpin this movement, reaffirming a commitment to equality, human rights, and the dignity of all individuals as fundamental to the democratic fabric. The fight against the anti-gender movement is not merely a battle over gender politics; it is a vital struggle for the soul of democracy itself.

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## **The will to resist**

For over a decade, academics in the field of gender studies in Europe and beyond have felt powerless in the face of the global transformation of higher education and the aggressive advancement of anti-liberal forces<sup>3</sup> – manifesting in the withdrawal of accredited programmes without explanation, harassment and threats faced by gender studies practitioners, the dismissal of protesting academics,<sup>4</sup> and even the forced exile of a country's most successful university (the Central European University from Hungary) following a long legal battle and in spite of widespread protests.<sup>5</sup>

This is not the first time in history that the sense of an overpowering enemy has overshadowed our nights, our dreams, and our everyday interactions. When they were threatened under similar circumstances, both Erasmus<sup>6</sup> and Zweig were able to move locations. But now, free movement is a privilege enjoyed by few. While high-profile academics and institutions such as CEU can relocate from countries in which anti-liberalism has taken over, others are unable to do so and must shoulder the everyday consequences of living and working under an authoritarian regime. So what can they do when it seems that nothing can be done?

For Zweig, figures like Erasmus, despite their apparent failures in their lifetimes,<sup>7</sup> embodied a future-oriented vision that transcended contemporary setbacks. It is this concept of the “victor in defeat” in particular that provides a profound framework for understanding resilience during challenging times. Throughout his works, Zweig suggests that what gives people and nations their “true and sacred measure”, what constitutes true heroism, is not the immediate successes represented by “the Alexanders, the Napoleons, the Attilas” but rather their pursuit of higher ideals via quiet, persistent dedication, especially when hope for change for the better is scarce. True victory resides in advancing human knowledge and understanding.<sup>8</sup>

As we again find ourselves in a “sleepless world”, watching the news late into the night, feeling powerless, and finding only missing heroes and heroines, this belief in the enduring power of hope and ideals and avoiding open confrontation – even in difficult times – is profoundly liberating. But what forms would such a response take in the context of the fundamental challenges faced by academia and gender studies practitioners in particular?

As illiberal forces capture institutions, resistance develops within invisible networks and can come from unexpected places, in line with Zweig’s insights.<sup>9</sup> The public higher education and professional organisations that are still in operation can play a key role in this regard. An approach that strengthens these professional communities sur place is needed to protect ideas and serve as a foundation for resistance. Today’s intellectuals can create resilient structures that withstand polarising forces by joining these organisations and building networks based on shared ethical principles rather than personal affinities. The “victor in defeat” approach also requires emotional intelligence under pressure, including recognising that some colleagues may have different priorities or lack the energy for resistance. Maintaining communication with these potential allies without alienating them keeps open possibilities for future collaboration.

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In addition, members of the gender studies field have learned that strategic engagement in public discourse is crucial. The decision taken by millions to leave certain social media platforms out of political conviction, however well intentioned, deprives them of a place to express their views and saddles them with the unenviable task of identifying and choosing between barely functioning alternatives. It also leaves these platforms open to illiberal forces.

In a highly mediatised world where the news coverage of an event is more important than the event itself, media skills are essential. Accessible communication in particular is a powerful tool against illiberalism. Illiberal movements often succeed by using populist, broadly understandable language. Conversely, the technical jargon and English-language terminology used by academics can create

barriers. Explaining complex concepts in simple terms can help with reaching wider audiences. Furthermore, rather than participating in debates framed as “for or against” fundamental rights, experts should reframe conversations around specific problems that can be addressed through research.

Practical tactics include cultivating relationships with social media influencers, leveraging existing organisations and resources, invoking established human rights frameworks, and acknowledging that conflict, when strategically managed, can create political opportunities.

The personal will to resist matters, too. Being prepared for the worst, establishing safety protocols for social media engagement, responding firmly to threats, choosing battles strategically, and recognising when silence becomes a form of resistance that denies illiberal systems their preferred targets all become essential practices. Zweig’s vision reminds us that even in apparent defeat, persistent commitment to human dignity and democratic values holds transformative potential. As he understood, sometimes the most profound victory is simply refusing to abandon one’s principles in the face of oppression.

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Andrea Pető is a professor at Central European University (CEU) and a research affiliate at the CEU Democracy Institute. She has received numerous awards for her work, which has been translated into 24 languages, including the 2018 All European Academies (ALLEA) Madame de Staël Prize for Cultural Values and the 2022 University of Oslo Human Rights Award. She was awarded the title of doctor honoris causa by Södertörn University, Sweden.

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