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## Book Review: Anti-gender Politics in the Populist Moment

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***Book Review: Anti-gender Politics in the Populist Moment***<sup>1</sup>

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In recent years, anti-gender actors and movements have become increasingly visible and have mobilized around a common opposition to gender ideology, i.e., a term used to oppose a broad spectrum of feminist ideas, principles, and socio-political reforms such as sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, new reproductive technologies, gender mainstreaming, and protection against gender violence. In their book *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk explain the growing visibility and power of anti-gender movements, discourses, and campaigns in Poland and beyond since mid-2000s with a focus on historical roots, cultural and political dimensions, and consequences for the future of democracy and the feminist inspired social justice vision. Their analysis expands from the Polish context but also demonstrates that local mobilizations against gender ideology and in support of family values take part into a common transnational mobilization across borders through a shared discourse, a traveling repertoire of action, and similar strategies. They offer a nuanced and complex analysis of how the recent proliferation of anti-gender mobilizations both in illiberal states and European liberal democracies with strong democratic traditions are part of a global resurgence of right-wing extremism and religious fundamentalism geared towards undermining liberal values, democratic debate, and gender equality vision.

The book consists of six chapters vividly exposing the centrality of gender in the construction of political frontiers, antagonisms and threat perceptions in the currently polarized political situation defined by many scholars as the “populist moment” (Mudde 2004, Mouffe 2018). Graff and Korolczuk argue that the current wave of ultraconservative mobilization against “gender ideology” is not a simple spillover of the anti-feminist backlash counteracting feminist acquisitions since the 1970s. For them, understanding the current global opposition to “gender” as a countermovement to modern feminism does not provide nuanced insights into feminism’s development and institutionalization in different regions and ignores the fact that “anti-gender movements seem to be most influential in countries such as Poland, where feminism has been less rather than more powerful” (p.140). Throughout the book, Graff and Korolczuk demonstrate that the current wave of anti-genderism and anti-gender mobilization signifies a new political configuration and operates as a key element of the rising hegemony of right-wing populist politics and the crisis of democracy. In the first two chapters, Graff and Korolczuk develop an analytical, systematic, and intersectional gender lens to draw attention to the central role that the anti-gender mobilization has played in the recent consolidation of the populist right as a transnational movement. They explain the alliance between anti-gender actors and right-wing populists by employing the term “opportunistic

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<sup>1</sup> Graff, A. and Korolczuk, E. (2022). *Anti-gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. London and NY: Routledge.

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synergy”, which they use to stress two levels of cooperation in-between, namely ideological/discursive, and strategic/organizational. They manifest that this opportunistic synergy, which includes political alliances, ideological affinities, and organizational ties, is based on the central claim that gender is an attack on collapsing natural differences, the well-being of children, family and the nation and it is an imposition of the global elite comprised of a wide range of actors such as feminists, left-wing and liberal politicians, transnational NGOs, and international bodies. Graff and Korolzcuk’s analysis sharply points out how this synergy works to the advantage of both sides, enabling right wing actors to enhance their popular appeal as defenders of the “common” people against the “depraved” elites, while making it possible for anti-gender mobilizations to reach beyond their traditional circles and connect with a wider audience.

Graff and Korolzcuk’s reflection on the ruling Law and Justice Party in Poland provides a compelling analysis, showing that in contexts where the illiberal parties ascend to power and adopt the anti-gender rhetoric as a central part of their political agenda, women’s rights, LGBTQI rights and progressive civil society activism face more disruptive challenges. In chapter three, their analysis addresses differences between the Polish context and Western countries and sheds light on right wing populists’ selective and contradictory appropriation of “gender” in Western European contexts where far right parties strategically utilize the idea of gender equality to cast Islam as uncivilized and barbaric while reinforcing the gendered racialization of Muslim communities.

A major contribution of this book is the argument that the upsurge of anti-gender mobilization needs to be understood as the populist right’s reactionary response to the failures of neoliberalism as a socio-cultural formation. Graff and Korolzcuk deftly illustrate how the right-wing populist actors have succeeded in hijacking the leftist critique of late capitalism with a conservative narrative on family and gender defining the private space of the family and women’s unpaid work and the re-traditionalization of gender roles as remedies for the negative effects for neoliberal policies. They shed light on how right-wing populist governments have continued to employ neoliberal policies while simultaneously introducing some state support for families and claiming to be the guardians of the family, nation, and the social cohesion.

In chapter four, Graff and Korolzcuk convincingly argue that the East-West divide matters in understanding the moral and political geography of the anti-gender movements and political agendas. This is not to suggest endorsing the culturalist discourse of exceptionalism of the East or the West as useful lens to gain comprehensive insights into anti-genderism and anti-gender mobilizations but rather, it is a call to foreground attention to the ways in which anti-genderists utilize the East-West binary to localize the anti-gender rhetorical kit and to feed into the hegemony of their right-wing populist rule. Graff and Korolzcuk examine the discursive appropriation of the conservative version of the anti-colonial rhetoric as a prominent trope especially in Eastern Europe and Global South. They vividly demonstrate that this anti-colonial frame portrays the West as the source of moral decay, equates gender egalitarianism with colonization and frames feminism as a “Western” construct fueling individualism and economic exploitation while imagining the East as resistant to the moral corruption resulting from the West and presenting “traditional family” as a site of resistance and solidarity.

Chapter five provides significant observations about the ways in which the cultural imaginary of anti-genderism appeals to emotions and how it helps anti-gender actors attract massive support. Drawing on and expanding the recent scholarship on the uses of emotions or affects in right-wing populism, they expose the distinctive emotional repertoire that anti-gender actors utilize to construct the alleged dangers awaiting children and families, mobilize negative emotions such as anxiety and fear in concerned parents, and trigger positive emotions by turning the identity of a parent into pride and solidarity. Graff and Korolzcuk connect this sociology-of-emotions perspective with the core argument in the book that interprets the current anti-gender upsurge as a conservative response to the excesses of neoliberalism.

Finally, Graff and Korolzcuk provide an insightful analysis on how feminists mobilize solidarity in response to anti-gender actors' assaults on women's rights. They mainly focus on the strategies of resistance adopted by the Polish women's movement between 2016-2018 against a possible total ban on abortion but also look beyond the Polish context. Their main argument is that new feminist movements that have recently emerged in opposition to right-wing populism in contexts such as Argentina, Spain, Ireland, and the United States are major social forces that crystallize women's leadership to counteract the global upsurge of right-wing populism and respond to the wide range of ways in which gender has become a central site for right-wing populist politics:

The new feminism responds not only to specific legal changes in the realm of gender proposed by right-wing populists but to the broader patterns of cultural change, including the re-masculinization of the public sphere, the gendering of fear and femo-nationalist discourses (p.143).

Graff and Korolzcuk employ the term "populist feminism" to explain how this new wave of women's movements mobilize around a novel feminist articulation of "the people" that is inclusive, pluralistic and is motivated by participants' self-definition as "ordinary women". Highlighting that these feminist mobilizations effectively trigger emotions such as righteous anger and anxiety and mobilize hopes and desires for a feminist inspired, inclusive future, Graff and Korolzcuk indicate that a left-wing populist feminist vision of resistance can challenge the right-wing patriarchal elite's claims of being the voice of the common people and their nationalist, misogynic and xenophobic assaults on women's rights.

*Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* makes a clear, nuanced, and important contribution to the growing scholarship on the relationship between right-wing populism and the recent upsurge of anti-gender ideology and mobilization. It offers novel insights from unexplored angles about anti-genderism and anti-gender mobilizations, the centrality of gender in anti-democratic politics and contemporary feminist movements and is an essential reading for activists, policy makers and those doing research in politics, cultural studies, gender and sexuality studies and sociology.

## References

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