

Book Review: *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* by Agnieszka Graff and Elzbieta Korolczuk, Routledge, 2022, 212 pages. ISBN: 9780367679507



REDESCRIPTIONS

Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

**SPECIAL ISSUE
BOOK REVIEW**

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Agnieszka Graff and Elzbieta Korolczuk's open-access book, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (2022), provides a comprehensive examination of contemporary anti-gender movements in Europe and their affiliations with right-wing parties. As leading scholars in this field, the authors offer insights primarily drawn from their research on Poland's political landscape. They illustrate how Polish anti-gender movements, while influenced by local dynamics, are intertwined with broader international anti-gender movements. The book incorporates two (revised) significant studies previously published on the topic of anti-gender movements by the authors. Chapter 3, titled "'Worse than communism and Nazism put together': Poland's anti-gender campaigns in a comparative perspective," was initially featured in a volume on anti-genderism in 2017, having been co-authored by Korolczuk and Graff. Additionally, Chapter 4, "'Ebola from Brussels': The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism," previously published in *Signs*, contributes to this dialogue. By including these studies as chapters, the authors enhance the theoretical framework (Chapter 1) and historical context (Chapter 2) underpinning their work, facilitating a fruitful integration of their previous publications. The dialogue between these chapters crystallizes the main argument and one of the biggest contributions of the book—namely, that the effectiveness of current anti-gender movements lies in their successful appropriation of certain traditionally leftist tropes and frames, such as anti-colonialism (Chapter 3) and anti-totalitarianism (Chapter 4), through which they manage to position themselves as the protector of the (family-centered, heteronormative, gender-traditional) 'ordinary people' against a (neoliberal, gender-inclusive, and feminist) totalitarian and colonial 'elite.' Moreover, because current anti-gender mobilizations are organized around the 'people' versus 'elite' populist logic, their ideas easily translate to right-wing populist politics, leading to an 'opportunistic synergy' between these actors. A noteworthy aspect of the book is Graff and Korolczuk's exploration of anti-gender politics from an emotional perspective, focusing on the instrumentalization of embodied experiences in political mobilization. This emotional dimension is particularly evident in Chapter 5, where the authors delve into the affective aspects of political activism. In the final

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chapter (Chapter 6), the authors analyze the Polish Black Protest movement, considering the affective success of anti-gender campaigns, and contemplate the potential emergence of ‘populist feminism’ (137). This chapter serves as a thought-provoking conclusion, offering insights into the intersection of affective politics and feminist activism.

Contributing to the intersection of various disciplines (political science, gender studies, social movement studies, and religious studies), *Anti-Gender Politics* is first and foremost a multi-faceted feminist analysis of recent political events and changes. Graff and Korolczuk remain true to their somewhat humorous but also courageous positionality statement as ‘gender ideologues,’ (8) and, with this publication, they bring feminist research ethics and epistemology to the forefront of their academic endeavors. However, as the title suggests, they also strongly aim to contribute to political science. They rightly point out that ‘what is missing in the growing literature on populism is awareness of the centrality of gender issues within this new political culture’ (10). Positioning ‘gender’ as a term, as well as a social category, in the core of their analysis, Graff and Korolczuk convincingly argue throughout their book that ‘[g]ender is no distraction from real politics; it resides at the heart of politics today’ as ‘a space where differences are negotiated and defined’ (164). The book is indeed a compelling demonstration of how central the term ‘gender’ has become in bringing together various parties, such as ‘neo- Nazis, football fans, and representatives of Catholic groups’ (2). In alliance with right-wing populist parties, ‘gender’ has also played a crucial role in current party political mobilization in Europe. The ‘opportunistic synergy’ between anti-gender fundamentalists and right-wing politicians benefits both parties: it provides more visibility and mainstreaming of fundamentalist groups while providing right-wing populists with ideological and discursive content. Especially important is the claim that gender should not be treated as a ‘mere cultural’ issue, as is so often the case in political science, but instead as ‘a site of powerful and often violent conflict’ (164). Gender conservatism in current politics is not just a cultural issue; it marks a critique of neo-liberalism and globalization and provides them with ‘remarkable ideological coherence and great mobilizing power’ (164). However, one may question whether the politicization of sex and gender has solely been a component of a ‘culture war,’ as the authors suggest, marking a shift between past and present anti-gender movements. In my interpretation, this book does more than simply emphasize that gender is no longer solely a part of the ‘culture war.’ Instead, it highlights two significant points. First, it underscores that the politicization of sex and gender always involves both ‘cultural’ and ‘affective’ dimensions—that is, a ‘discursive’ dimension, according to Chantal Mouffe, whose ideas the authors (partially) draw upon. This acknowledgment does not imply, however, that these dimensions do not profoundly influence every other aspect of life. Second, it suggests that contemporary, postmodern political mobilizations—not just those around same-sex marriages, abortion, and adoption but also those around immigration and war—are increasingly ‘discursive,’ where gender assumes a central role, perhaps by drawing so effectively on culture and affect.

The book’s other significant contribution lies in its exploration of the under-researched realm concerning the influence of emotions and affect in (gender) politics. Graff and Korolczuk insightfully acknowledge that ‘right-wing populists have captured the hearts and imaginations of large portions of local populations’ (164), and they attribute this success to the politicization of certain tropes, such as the ‘parent’ and the ‘child.’ Inevitably, Korolczuk and Graff touch upon the concept of identity and

the interrelatedness of individual and political identification processes as a core of successful affective political mobilization. Their examples focus on the political power of the mobilization of the 'parent identity' in both right-wing populist (Chapter 5) and feminist (Chapter 6) mobilizations. Focusing on the 'parent' as a political identity allows Graff and Korolczuk to illustrate the affective power of anti-gender mobilizations beyond the established academic thought that right-wing populist actors play on the fear and shame around a 'lost' heteropatriarchal and white-supremacist norm of masculinity (Wodak 2015). In their analysis, Graff and Korolczuk expand the experience of shame and fear to the 'parent' and successfully de-gender and (partly) de-essentialize political identities that are mobilized through anti-gender movements and politics. Additionally, the authors adeptly demonstrate how the feminist Black Protest movement appropriated right-wing tropes, such as portraying themselves as 'ordinary people,' to rally against the abortion ban on behalf of 'ordinary women' (156). As Graff and Korolczuk point out, 'the Black Protests persistently strove to reframe the ongoing political conflict by claiming the identity of the "people" for the women whose rights were in danger' (156). Women's experiences of insecurity within the Polish healthcare system have lent weight to the demand for 'safety' for women in light of the abortion ban. The subsequent analysis of both sides of gender politics masterfully shows that modern politics is about the discursive struggle of 'who are the people, who can represent them in the political arena, and whose knowledge counts as legitimate knowledge' (160). Graff and Korolczuk also draw attention to the pivotal roles of technology and social media in this struggle, where social media not only facilitates the rapid dissemination of discursive content but also fosters political identification processes through inviting personalized actions (e.g., taking a selfie dressed in black).

Through their book, Graff and Korolczuk contribute to the established political literature on emotions and populism. However, their attempt to build upon the more radical political theories of Chantal Mouffe is only partially realized. While their focus is not on identity, they primarily conceptualize it as 'embodied experience,' overlooking the intricate relationship between the two. Consequently, the concept of 'affect' is bracketed with a predefined list of emotions like fear, shame, anger, and pride, overlooking the discursive processes of identification and leaving one's identity somewhat entrenched in essentialism. Their oscillation between positivist (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016; Wodak 2015) and anti-essentialist (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018) political theories is also present in their literature review and definition of populism. Despite their promising ambition to reconcile these two strands of populism theories, they ultimately adopt a somewhat positivist perspective, emphasizing the all-encompassing agency of political actors rather than engaging with more structuralist political theories. However, it is crucial to note that Graff and Korolczuk initially express that their primary interest is in analyzing the anti-gender movement 'on the ground' rather than making significant contributions to populism or political theories. Their epistemic approach, which prioritizes starting from empirical observations rather than rigid theoretical assumptions, is highly valuable; specifically, they aim to use theories of populism to enhance understanding of the empirical realities they 'found on the ground' (23). Nevertheless, their interpretation of these 'findings' tends to be influenced by mainstream positivist theories, despite their intention to remain open to a more anti-essentialist perspective. This suggests that there is room for further research to complement their insightful contributions.

The book is a highly valuable contribution to the body of literature on anti-gender mobilizations and a summary of the field's main findings from the last several years. It is a worthy book for academics of political science, gender studies, and social movement studies. Moreover, it is a recommended read for policymakers and lobbyists around sex and gender issues as well as, first and foremost, the authors hope, for feminist activists. As sex and gender are something we all have, this book is also recommended for anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the complex and often turbulent politics of our time, which inevitably intersect with our bodies, desires, and personal choices.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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