


BOOK REVIEW

***Wronged and Dangerous: Viral Masculinity and the Populist Pandemic.* By Karen Lee Ashcraft. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022. 264 pp. \$149.95 (cloth), ISBN: 9781529221398; \$19.99 (paper), ISBN: 9781529221404.**

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A growing research field has investigated the gendered nature of politically organized populism, and especially radical-right populism. Adding to this literature and offering a more systemic explanation of the role of gender in populism, Karen Lee Ashcraft's *Wronged and Dangerous* moves beyond the study of politically organized populism to focus on the feelings underlying individuals' populist attitudes.

The book advances the argument that populist attitudes result from a feeling of aggrieved entitlement, and aggrieved masculinity in particular. Ashcraft argues that aggrieved masculinity—that is, the notion that (white) men are wrongfully denied what they are entitled to—constitutes the main driver and spreader of populism across societies.

In Part 1, Ashcraft conveys her understanding of gender and the role of gender in people's reluctance to adhere to COVID-19 prevention measures. In a thought-provoking attempt to move beyond the binary distinction between men and women, Ashcraft conceptualizes gender not primarily as a personal attribute but as a force or energy that shapes how people feel and behave.

The opposition to COVID-19 prevention measures is understood here as an example of populism. This becomes clearer in Part 2, in which Ashcraft explains her understanding of populism: it is conceptualized as the expression of feelings of aggrieved entitlement toward politicians. In the example of opposition to COVID-19 prevention measures, such grievances pertain to people's perceived entitlement to behave as they like, independent of the pandemic. Different from common definitions of populism in the political science literature, the people-versus-elite conflict is thus considered to be a consequence of populism rather than its defining feature. Based on this, populist political leadership becomes a form of anger management, with potentially detrimental consequences—such as the spread of COVID-19 as a result of people's opposition to prevention measures.

Two important concepts used in this book, gender and populism, are conceptualized in rather novel ways, inviting readers to rethink their understanding of them. Together, these conceptualizations pave the way for Ashcraft's main argument and theoretical contribution to research on populism, political behavior, and politics and gender. In Part 3, the author convincingly develops the argument that aggrieved masculinity constitutes a main explanation for how contemporary populism spreads across the globe and different social contexts.

By arguing that aggrieved masculinity is available to everyone aiming to uphold the patriarchal, heteronormative social order, Ashcraft explains the spread of populism among people of different socioeconomic classes and genders. In doing so, she challenges the prominent argument that socioeconomic class and related grievances constitute the main drivers of populism. The author does not downplay the importance of class and convincingly argues for the intersections between class and aggrieved masculinity. However, she holds that aggrieved masculinity better explains the successful spread of contemporary populism across contexts and different population groups.

In Part 4, Ashcraft continues to explain the dangers of aggrieved masculinity. Like the literature on toxic masculinity, the book suggests that aggrieved masculinity can explain incidents of violence and shootings, climate-harming behavior, opposition to COVID-19 prevention measures, and men's higher rates of depression and suicide. In line with existing research on the *manosphere*, Ashcraft further highlights the role of the internet in enabling the transnational spread of aggrieved masculinity. In doing so, she emphasizes that aggrieved masculinity is not only toxic but also viral, leading to a "populist pandemic."

Finally, Ashcraft outlines a tentative strategy for addressing aggrieved masculinity. She convincingly argues that countering populism by exclusionary and dismissive antipopulism will not alleviate populists' feelings of aggrieved entitlement, and therefore will not address the problem. Considering the gravity and urgency of the potential consequences of populism for society as a whole—for example, intensified global warming, the accelerated spread of COVID-19, or gun violence—Ashcraft calls for an inclusive approach to addressing populism, a strategy that she defines as "critical feeling." The approach calls for questioning not only the origins of our thoughts (i.e., critical thinking) but also the origins of our feelings. While this is a thought-provoking suggestion, Ashcraft does not provide suggestions on how societies can foster critical feeling. Rather, she suggests that this will be explored in future research.

Exemplified by the proposed strategy of "critical feeling," as well as the aforementioned conceptualizations of gender and populism, feelings play a crucial role in this book. While Ashcraft convincingly argues for the importance of feelings in understanding and addressing contemporary populism, the definition of feelings remains unclear. The role of feelings in gender and populism thus leaves space for future theoretical exploration and empirical testing. Future scholarship might consider the following questions: How can we measure feelings of aggrieved entitlement and masculinity? How temporary or stable are such feelings? When and how are they activated? How stable do such feelings need to be to fuel a persistent populist movement? Who is more likely to

experience feelings of aggrieved entitlement and masculinity, and who is more likely to express and act upon such feelings?

Ashcraft's personal writing style and examples from everyday life help the reader follow her argument. Further, the references to popular culture and salient topics in contemporary public debates, will appeal to a wider non-academic audience. Her thought-provoking conceptualizations and explanations of gender and populism may particularly be of interest for scholars and students in the fields of political behavior, populism, and politics and gender.

Finally, the book may especially appeal to readers interested in the U.S. context. While the international online and offline spread of populism and the manosphere suggest that Ashcraft's argument may hold for other contexts than the United States, the book strongly builds on examples of phenomena observed in the United States. Given that this context is marked by particularly strong partisanship and partisan polarization, which may fuel societal conflict and resulting grievances, future research may explore the role of aggrieved entitlement in explaining populism in other contexts than the United States.

Competing interest. The author declares none.

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