

BOOK REVIEW

Varieties of Opposition to Gender Equality in Europe

Edited by Mieke Verloo. New York and London: Routledge, 2018. 237p.
Hardback £120.00, paperback £34.99

Claudia Padovani 

Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies, University of Padova, via del Santo 28, Padova, 35131, Italy
Corresponding author. Email: claudia.padovani@unipd.it

(Received 2 March 2020; accepted 2 March 2020; first published online 27 April 2020)

How to conceptualize opposition to gender equality? And why addressing this issue in the present time? These are the core questions guiding the contributions in a well-organized and theoretically consistent volume edited by Mieke Verloo, a scholar who has contributed, through her intellectual leadership, to the emergence and consolidation of gender and politics as a field of research within political science.

The aim of the book is to overcome shortcomings in a field, that of gender and politics, that has been mainly concerned with comparative analyses on the achievements of gender equality, focusing on the causes and consequences of equality progress, rather than interrogating multiple dynamics of resistance that hinder or constrain such progress. Paying attention to instances of resistance to change concerning ‘gender+’ equality issues – thus including intersectional elements of class, race and sexuality in the analysis – is more than just a way of filling a gap in academic literature. This approach opens also a possibility to better understand the realities of equality politics, by focusing on the variety of actors involved and on the interplay of material and discursive mechanisms, while linking oppositional dynamics to the quality of democracy in today’s world. This concern with contemporary democratic (un)developments emerges as one of the underlying themes across the chapters, as opposition to gender+ equality is observed in its interactions with the rise of the far right in Europe, with reduced spaces for civil society to articulate their demands, with attacks to freedom of expression and with instances of ‘de-democratization’. Moreover, opposition to gender+ equality is observed in its interactions with also a diffused neoliberal capitalism that is weakening social democratic forces and is globally conducive to increasing inequalities.

An articulated definition of ‘opposition to gender+ equality’ accompanies this proposal to conceptualize opposition so as to fully understand its relation to feminist struggles for change. Opposition is here understood as: ‘any activity in which a perspective opposing feminist politics and gender+ equality policy is articulated in a way that can be expected to influence or is actually influencing politics or policy making at any stage’ (Verloo, p. 6). In this context not just formal policies that relate to gender+ equality are taken into consideration; more broadly the focus is on all forms of opposition to the ‘feminist project’ conceived as the ‘set of processes and practices in civil society that creates new meanings and social goals, drawing on a range of rhetorical and material resources’ (Walby cited on p. 42) with a general objective of changing gender unequal relations in society.

At the same time, ‘any activity’ refers to the plurality of manifestations of oppositional practices, discussed in the chapters on the basis of a theoretical framework that is introduced in the first part of the book, tested through the different contributions, and refined in the Conclusion. Conny Roggeband (chapter 2) refers to the contributions that social mobilization theory can

bring to the analysis, highlighting how an understanding of political opportunity structures, resource mobilization and framing activities are crucial to appreciate the conditions that facilitate and foster opposition in different contexts. Mieke Verloo (chapter 3) builds on Walby's social complexity theory and suggests that articulating the nexus between societal domains – of polity, economics, violence, culture, cathexis and episteme – and gender+ regimes as systems of social relations, is crucial to understand oppositional dynamics in due recognition of actors' interactions, interests and power relations. This combination of theoretical perspectives provides the building blocks for analysing opposition to gender+ equality across different arenas.

The 'varieties of opposition' are presented through chapters that reflect different geo-cultural context, from Central and Northern Europe to the US; each dealing with concrete cases and focusing on specific forms of opposition. These are described in their main features and critically analysed in view of fostering the reader's understanding of the conditions that characterize the specific case and context. We are therefore invited to think that opposition 'does not consist of isolated events, but it constitutes a system of indirect or direct, ore or less visible and outspoken, psychological and physical acts' (Strid, p. 69).

Plural are, in fact, the forms of opposition. They can be visible, even outspoken, as in the case of social mobilizations by conservative groups taking the streets to protest against a law design (the French case of *La Manif pour Tous* against the law on same-sex marriage in 2012 described by Paternotte, chapter 9); but they can also be latent, as in cases where gender equality is a norm-loaded policy and cannot be opposed in an overt manner, like in the context of European institutions (chapter 5).

Opposition can aim at preventing, inhibiting or obstructing progress towards gender+ equality; and can take the form of repression as well as of regulation. Repression operates through any act of violence aimed at silencing voices, conceptualized as a form of opposition to gender equality by Strid, who focuses her analysis on cases of online violence (chapter 4); whereas opposition through regulation is the likely result of processes whereby existing progressive measures are put at stake, as in the Macedonian case narrated by Miskovska (chapter 11). The case is exemplary of the fact that drawbacks from progressive measures are always a possibility, even in a short time span. It also indicates that opposition to gender+ equality can be understood as emblematic of larger restrictions of people's freedoms, and reduced protection of fundamental rights.

Resistance can target gender+ equality in general, and adopt a 'catch all' approach whereby as diverse issues as gender mainstreaming, sexual orientation and same sex marriage are conflated in the same opposing discourse. But resistance can also focus on specific measures, as in the Swedish case involving the Social Democrat Party and its internal conflicts concerning paternal leave regulation (chapter 7).

In all cases discursive processes are central to oppositional actors and dynamics that conceptualize and frame feminist struggles and equality politics, often ending up opposing their own 'rhetorical artefacts'. In this respect the media, traditional and digital, play crucial roles in oppositional dynamics, as they contribute to disseminate those narrative and frames.

Beside the media, plural are the actors involved. Not only mobilizing groups, but also religious entities, which often intersect with social mobilizations, as described by Paternotte (chapter 9) through a lively account of the emergence and success of *La Manif pour Tous* in France. Actors can be conservative political forces but also progressive parties if confronted with the tension between different social justice projects, as in the above-mentioned Swedish case (chapter 7). Relevant actors can also be those officials and bureaucrats expected to implement gender equality policies, who have been found to exert gatekeeping forms of opposition through not acting, not recognizing the value of issues, or devaluing gender+ equality interventions and their promoters (chapter 5).

What is highlighted by several contributors is the role of patriarchy and how this plays out in support of oppositional dynamics. If it is to be expected that patriarchy always fights back when

challenged, in the words of Roggeband ‘The prevalence of patriarchy places the defenders of the status quo in a more privileged and powerful position compared to the promoters of feminism project’ (p. 32). This invites to be attentive and cautious about the ‘success’ of opposition. Substantial as well as procedural success is to be considered; partial success can be relevant when oppositional forces manage to constrain institutional actors’ regulatory interventions; opposition is also successful when it conditions, limits, re-orient gender+ projects and activism.

The edited volume shed lights on unexplored aspects of gender and politics; it provides conceptual and theoretical tools to further expand the investigation on the conditions and dynamics within which the feminist project takes shape; it articulates a vision whereby such project requires ‘deep democracy’ to mobilize, while oppositional forces thrives in the absence of democracy.

This is all the more relevant in contemporary Europe, as well as beyond the region. The contributions to this volume are the first attempt to open a space of reflection in this direction; yet they remain quite Europe-centred (Verloo recognized that analyses are missing from Southern Europe). European are the cases discussed, as well as most of the literature referred to in both the theoretical and empirical sections. Given the magnitude of the challenge – gender+ equality being an internationally agreed upon norm – and the need to fully understand how dynamics of opposition play out in different contexts, a broader and more global outlook would be welcome in the future. When democratic rules and practices are challenged from Brazil to India, understanding the effects and implication of such developments on the local articulation of the feminist project may allow to consider the European experience with different lenses, thus enriching our understanding of global challenges and interconnections.

Globally relevant in this respect are the new questions that emerge from the analyses: is the rise of oppositional activities an indicator of moderate success of the feminist project? But also: are the observed oppositional activities likely to transform, through transnational collaborations and further challenges to democratic quality, into a ‘project’ in itself?