



Themed Book Review on Gender and Conservatism

Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe. Edited by Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan, and Andrea Petö. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 386 pp. \$119.00 (e-book), \$159.00 (hardcover).

doi:10.1017/S1743923X17000307

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The rise of far-right movements and parties in Europe has deep consequences for democracy and equality. However, while several studies have analyzed radical-right politics and its threat to democracy in Europe, its gender dimensions have been little addressed so far. Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan, and Andrea Petö's edited collection is thus a welcome pioneer.

To analyze far-right politics in Europe, the book adopts different types of feminist approaches (Kantola and Lombardo 2017): a *women* approach that analyzes where the women are in far-right groups and parties and what their role and motivation for joining is; a *gender* approach that analyzes the role of gender equality policy in the far-right agenda; and a *discursive* and sometimes *intersectional* approach that explores the discourse of the far right with respect to gender and other inequalities such as ethnicity and religion.

The book shows the relation of gender and far-right parties and movements throughout Europe, mapping developments in Sweden, Finland, Germany, Austria, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Poland, Spain, and Greece. A multidisciplinary authorship with expertise on gender, sexuality, migration, ethnicity, communication, law, sociology, anthropology, political science, and peace and conflict studies is reflected across 24 chapters on the causes of far-right developments and

This review is part of a themed issue on gender and conservatism. To read the editor's note on the section, visit doi:10.1017/S1743923X17000605.

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/18 \$30.00 for The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.

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their gender component, the challenge of radical-right movements for European liberal democracies, the limits of such democracies in facing this political phenomenon, the comparison of U.S. and European far-right politics, and the role of gender-based approaches in prevention and intervention in right-wing extremism in Europe.

Despite the heterogeneity of manifestations of gender and far-right politics in Europe, the contributions argue that some issues are common to analyses of the North, East, South, and West. First, men tend to be overrepresented in radical-right parties in Europe, from the Finns of Finland to the Freedom Party of Austria to Spanish far-right groups, and far-right women in countries such as Finland — see the chapter by Tuukka Ylä-Anttila and Eeva Luhtakallio — tend to give importance to class issues by emphasizing social justice views that differ from those of their male counterparts.

Second, women seem to have specific reasons for joining far-right groups, among them the possibility to make their voices heard and to gain alternative forms of emancipation in societies in which inequality has grown with economic, political, and social crises. In the chapter on Sweden by Diana Mulinari and Anders Neergaard, affiliation with the far right allows women who are more excluded from society and who have more precarious forms of employment to feel integrated and empowered. In the chapter on Hungary by Anikó Félix, joining these groups provides women with specific identities as “culture keepers,” “fighters,” or “spiritual women.”

Third, despite their heterogeneity, the discourse of radical-right groups in Europe shows commonalities in its nationalistic, racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, antifeminist, anti-LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender), conservative, and antidemocratic attitudes. Few gender issues are discussed; gender is conceived as binary and based on fixed biological difference; heterosexual roles are presented as hegemonic; traditional family is supported and opposed to women’s rights; conservative gender roles tend to prevail that present women as mothers, spouses, and caregivers, having a biological function in human reproduction; and heterosexual white hegemonic masculinities are put forward.

Antifeminism and antigender ideology are expressed in different ways in the far-right discourse. In the chapter on Austria by Carina Klammer and Judith Goetz, for example, by portraying boys and men as disadvantaged victims of a feminist-dominated society that benefits women and girls; and in Miquel Ramos and Frauke Büttner’s chapter on Spain by stating that women “do not want to be oppressed by sexist or Taliban feminists” (118), where a “Taliban feminist” is defined as one who “dogmatically impedes women’s choice of motherhood” over career (118), a choice of

motherhood that, according to one radical-right female leader, should make women “proud” to leave their jobs. Anti-abortion discourses are common in antifeminist slogans, as much as anti-LGBT discourses are often part of the far-right groups’ agenda, with explicit rejection of LGBT rights to equal marriage. And transphobic actions are present in radical-right groups’ mobilizations and defamatory statements against trans people as a threat to human nature.

A recurrent theme is the instrumentalization of gender discourses against migrant, especially Muslim, people. This is what Francesca Scrinzi calls the “racialization of sexism” (132) or the appropriation of women’s rights discourse to use against immigrants. Sexism is racialized and attributed to migrants in media and right-wing political discourses, yet it is overlooked in French society. In the National Front of Marine Le Pen, as discussed in the chapter on France, women and family are presented as potential victims of immigration, which is associated with crime, insecurity, and violence, and migrants are presented as a sexual threat to female citizens. Gender equality is portrayed as a key value of French national identity, opposed to migrants’ culture, which is presented as patriarchal. Gender equality is instrumentally used to express historical narratives about Muslims as a “threat to the Christian Occident” (85). Muslim men and their patriarchal culture are constructed as a threat to emancipated native European women, and Muslim women tend to be constructed in the discourse as subaltern and passive. The chapter by Renate Bitzan on Germany shows the instrumentalizing of the discourse of native women’s emancipation against immigrants and the use of sexism-racism in masculinity discourses of far-right ideology in which native men’s function is to save the “pure race” by protecting white German women, controlling their sexuality and reproduction, and fighting against “foreign” men as a “threat” to “our own” women (72).

The volume’s contributions are not uncritical of European liberal democracies, identifying gendered problems in their approach to integration policies that are instrumentalized by far-right political leaders to their advantage. Scrinzi is critical of the French republican model of integration through *laïcité* or secularism, which Marine Le Pen’s National Front uses against Muslim people, but which, even before Le Pen’s intervention, already prohibited the display of cultural and religious specificities in the public arena through laws that ended up criminalizing veiled women. Eszter Kováts’s chapter studies ultraconservative European movements with links to the Roman Catholic Church that oppose what they call “gender ideology” — including actions against women’s

reproductive rights, LGBT rights such as marriage and adoption rights, and government-sponsored gender equality education in schools. These movements pose a challenge to liberal democracy by attacking democratic rights and freedoms and negating pluralism. However, they also show that current liberal democracies bear responsibility, too, in the emergence of such antidemocratic movements because they exclude many people from European societies. These conservative antigender movements create spaces for some of these people to voice their anger and obtain a sense of empowerment that current European liberal democracies do not deliver. The consequences of exclusion and inequality processes need to be understood and addressed for the well-being of democracies and their inhabitants.

The book not only draws a diagnosis of the problem but also links theory and praxis about gender and far-right politics in Europe by offering gender-related solutions. Silke Baer, Oliver Kossack, and Anika Posselius's chapter recounts the experience of WomEx in Germany and its international organization, RAN (Radicalisation Awareness Network), a European network of practitioners working in various fields related to the prevention of radicalization. Their suggestions include the need for prevention that takes gender into account in work with extreme-right youth, in social and antiviolence training, and in community work.

Far-right political movements and parties are indeed a challenge to European democratic states. The roots of these de-democratization phenomena are within European societies and reflect the need to address inequalities of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Gender analyses, as shown by *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, are key to both providing a full understanding of far-right politics and working towards the redemocratization of Europe. This groundbreaking and thought-provoking book will appeal not only to social science scholars from a variety of disciplines but more broadly to any person interested in understanding – and possibly counteracting – challenges to democracy in our time.

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