

# An Anti-Gender Europe

*by Magali Della Sudda*

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**This panorama of the mobilizations against homosexual marriage in twelve European countries highlights the federation of several conservative movements under the unifying ‘Anti-Gender Crusade’ banner.**

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Is the *Manif pour Tous* (Demonstration for Everyone) a French exception? The book edited by David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar studies the protests targeting the policies promoting equal rights for men and women, and equal rights for heterosexual and homosexual couples in 12 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, the Republic of Ireland, Poland, Russia, Slovenia and Spain. The authors call these actions, organised in defence of the family and universal anthropological structures, ‘Anti-Gender Campaigns or ‘Anti Gender ‘Crusades’,<sup>1</sup> creating a conceptual shift from the idea of the ‘moral crusade’.<sup>2</sup> The book, published in English, is easy to read with its clear style and concise and synthetic chapters on each of the countries.

## **Anti-gender campaigns**

The introduction reveals the transnational and European nature of the anti-gender campaigns that have received little attention to date. It provides a comprehensive history of the genesis of the ‘anti gender ideology’ (p. 4), the rhetoric common to all these mobilisations. These movements express the need for a social and political order structured by gender hierarchy. The cornerstone of their discourse, a condemnation of ‘gender ideology’, was first

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Garbagnoli, Massimo Prearo, *La croisade ‘anti-genre’ : du Vatican aux manifs pour tous*, Paris, Textuel, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Gaël Brustier, *Le Mai 68 conservateur : que restera-t-il de la manif pour tous ?*, Paris, Cerf, 2014.

developed at the Vatican, in Jean-Paul II (1978-2005) and Benoît XVI's sermons (2005-2013).

## **A federating rhetoric**

An examination of the connection between the political field and the protests shows that various formerly scattered groups seem to rally around the anti-gender banner that works like glue. Anti-gender rhetoric is common to what can be called the populist political parties on the right and the extreme right (p. 13). Hence, in Austria, as Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer show, the success of the demonstrations is closely linked to the political power relationship that favours the conservative and extreme right parties. The porosity between anti-gender protests and the political field appears again in Spain, where the People's Party amplified the opposition to the Socialist government's policies from 2004 à 2011. Monica Cornejo and José Ignacio Pichardo Galán underscore the connections between the positions adopted by the Spanish episcopate against civil marriage for homosexual couples and greater access to voluntary abortion, and the vigour of the charismatic movement 'The Neocatechumenal Way' and the protest movements.

Nonetheless, these protests have not had the expected effect in terms of redefining gender policies. In Germany, the politicisation of the issue by the far-right party, *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany), founded in 2013, is similar to what was observed in France, where the National Front was the most active party in this campaign. The Hungarian case shows a structure of unfortunate opportunities, despite the conservative parties being in power. Eszter Kováts and Andrea Pető explain the weakness of the anti-gender demonstrations by the absence of equal gender policies, the continuum between conservative and far-right parties on sexual issues, and the weakness of the feminist and LGBT (lesbians, gays, bi, trans) movements. Despite a Wallon episcopate whose figurehead is a strong supporter of this cause, 'No one is a prophet in their own land', as Sara Bracke, Wannes Dupont and David Paternotte remind us in their words on Belgium. According to Michel Schooyans and Marguerite Peeters, from Belgium, who travel the world to fight against 'gender', their homeland offers few opportunities to the anti-gender campaign, due to the way the State is structured: the division into communities and pillarization, where intermediary entities – parties or religious institutions – play an important institutional and social role.

## **A correlation between identity dynamics?**

Several contributions explain the correlation between the dynamics of national or regional identity and the use of the anti-gender discourse. The chapter on Croatia presents a convincing analysis of national identity dynamics backed by local churches and a strong anti-communist sentiment, encouraged by the Catholic Church. This configuration boosted support for the demonstrations against 'gender ideology', presented as a totalitarian concept, inspired by communism or radical feminism. The interlinked campaign, conducted in the context of daily life, or through religious associations, led the government to abandon its implementation of policies to eradicate discrimination based on gender, sex or sexuality, recommended by the European institutions. In Slovenia, according to R. Kuhar the anti-European factor seen in other countries is euphemised to benefit a denunciation of the corrupt local elite. Russia stands out as the last rampart against international egalitarian policies imposed by international organizations and the European Union. Following this rhetoric, the defence of a family model based on heterosexuality is intrinsic to the Russian identity and backed by the Orthodox Church.

Similarly, the question of German national identity and its 'post-essentialist' (p. 105) foundations is one of the keys to interpreting the 'Anti-Genderismus' in Germany. On the pretext of fighting Brussels' authoritarian directives, the AfD party provides a supportive channel to propagate media campaigns against the European gender mainstreaming policies, promoted since the end of the 1990s. In the AfD's discourse, Paula-Irene Villa identifies an anti-68 rhetoric ((p. 105) that reflects a moral panic, '*German Angst*', crystallised around the question of German identity (p. 105). Liberal and egalitarian policies are presented as encouraging paedophilia and the sexualisation of children, and this is also the case in Italy where the idea of child protection is a driving force in the 'Difendiamo i nostri figli' committees. (p. 163). Defending children and the family were also the key focus of the demands expressed by the *Manif pour Tous* in France in 2012-2013.

## **The disqualification of scientific knowledge on gender**

These movements also reject the scientific status of gender studies. In Poland, this disqualification is coloured by anti-intellectualism and associated with a global distrust of biotechnological progress. Agnieszka Graff and Elzbieta Korolczuk show that the Polish protests are an example of resistance against both neo-liberalism and the European policies of equality and secularisation. Kevin Moss underscores that Russia reveals a specific configuration by entrusting universities and intellectuals with a clear role in the struggle against gender studies.

## **Street demonstrations and collective action**

Given the scale of the street demonstrations that gathered several thousands of people, France seems to be a paragon of anti-gender campaigns. The *Manif pour Tous* is a reference for the Italian demonstrators. In Italy, as Sara Garbagnoli recalls, bills against discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation, and civil marriage for same sex couples, have also faced fierce opposition. Italian familialism and the pervasiveness of differentialism provide a fertile terrain for the Vatican-led campaign, the *Manif pour Tous-Italia*, and the *Sentinelle in piedi*, the men and women who keep vigil, standing in silence. The latter have, in fact, outdone the French *Sentinelles debout* in terms of the numbers that take part in the vigils.

The French protests date back to the 2010s, according to Josselin Tricou and Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer. They are structured by the secularisation of French culture, public opinion about homosexual parenthood, the political situation and the divisions within the Catholic Church. The trend of confessional disaffiliation amongst the youngest generations invalidates the efficiency of a theological argumentation. Hence, as in most other countries, the Church adopts a secular rhetoric. In this respect, the priest and psychotherapist Tony Anatrella's use of psychoanalysis to defend a social and symbolic heterosexual social order, is a sign of the malleability of the anti-gender framework. The success this strategy has encountered can be explained by the old and deep-seated links that have long existed between the French clergy and the Vatican. A major effort at communication, with Frigide Barjot as one of the key protagonists, the creation of youth groups, young women's or mixed groups like the Hommen, the Antigones, the Salopards or the Gavroches, attenuates the image of a mobilisation by the Catholic rear guard and provides a multi-faceted image of a committed youth. The Church is both an actor in, and transformed by the mobilisations. By opposing same sex marriage and adoption by same sex couples, progressive Catholics who have broken with the church have found a means to reconcile with their coreligionists, thus consolidating the conservative poles in the Church. Several trajectories are described to support this argument, for example the path followed by Jérôme Vignon, President of *Semaines sociales* (p. 92). The other chapters do not provide such a detailed analysis of the Church, but the division over the issue of marriage for homosexual couples is visible in the religious field in Germany (Chapter 6), where the Protestant Churches, that usually encourage diverse family forms, are divided on this subject.

## **European campaigns or campaigns in Europe?**

This work leads us to question the usual gaps between the East and the West or the specificity of the Catholic countries, which are considered more conservative in their approach to gender policy issues, by showing that the demonstrations against gender equality and

sexuality are occurring all over Europe. Nonetheless, it does give rise to several remarks. The case studies would have benefitted from being organised by theme rather than by alphabetical order, like the comparative analysis provided in the concluding chapter. The transnational dynamic ultimately remains in the background and is only approached in the last chapter (p. 270-272). Throughout the work we find a few key male and female figures who act as 'brokers' linking the mobilisations, but the action in the European space is not studied as such. What of the presence of these groups in European institutions, their efforts to place these issues on the European Parliament's agenda? We think, in particular, here of the '*Nouveau féminisme européen*' campaigns that target gender theory and were at the forefront of the struggle against the Estrela Report on gender equality (2013), or the links these protest groups maintain with the European People's Party.

Finally, the choice of a discursive framework often favours a reading from above – the Vatican – looking down at the secular world. This may downplay the discord among the clergy on these questions, or even obscure the tensions between the protesting believers and certain legalist clerics. For example, the French episcopate was not the driving force behind the 2012 protest movement, which was actually initiated by secular activists, and the clergy itself is divided. The initiative of the prayer on August 15 2012, launched by the Archbishop of Paris, should not obscure the fact that the 'Family and Society' council, within the French Episcopal Conference, maintained a legalist and more open attitude. In two chapters we find an erroneous interpretation of the ban on the headscarf and religious symbols in schools or public life (p.82). The terms employed would benefit from being more specific: the law prohibiting the concealment of the face in public space is an internal security law, not a regulation applicable to cults. While France was the first, it is not the only country to have adopted this type of legislation. On the other hand, as the authors underscore, in most of the countries observed, the discourse employed in the campaigns is not based on religious arguments. This is an invitation to take the analysis of the role of the relationship between the State and religions further. It should also be distinguished from the connection between the dynamics of religious identity and national and regional identity, which play a key role in enhancing the receptivity of the campaigns

Of course, these remarks in no way detract from the quality of the work, and one of its merits is clearly the shift away from the French exception, to offer a wider perspective on the anti-gender Campaigns.

*Reviewed: Roman Kuhar, David Paternotte, Eds. Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe Mobilizing against Equality, London, Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd, 2017, 292 p.*

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