

by **Eva Karlberg**

”Is it the swan song of patriarchy, or the beginning of a new ice age?”

**Interview with Agnieszka Graff
and Elżbieta Korolczuk**

I met Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk in Stockholm to talk about the phenomenon of anti-genderism, as they have recently written together on this puzzling yet so urgent topic.¹ At CBEES Annual conference “Competing Futures: From Rupture to Re-articulation” 2017, Agnieszka Graff gave a thought-provoking keynote lecture on anti-genderism as a mobilizing force which incorporates such diverse ideas as anti-colonialism, anti-feminism, homophobia, Catholic conservatism, EU-skepticism, general populism, islamophobia and an aversion to refugees. In this amalgam, “gender” is used to connect the cultural with the economic, or as a “symbolic glue”² which does not just attack women or feminism but functions as a tool to challenge liberal democracy.³ In her speech, Agnieszka Graff also highlighted the need to combine redistribution and recognition politics with gender (especially the inclusion of politics of care), in order to counter illiberal and conservative movements. Elżbieta Korolczuk examined the topic from the other side in her presentation of her recent research on parental movements, in which she sees anti-genderism from the point of view of the grassroots – showing the very attractiveness and political efficacy of the anti-gender discourse. Elżbieta Korolczuk also directed an appeal to us: we, as academics, researchers and feminists, need to show a genuine interest in people’s life-worlds and their concerns, and to start looking for what we have in common with those who are attracted to conservative and anti-feminist ideas. Thus, both Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk strive to understand the phenomenon which is spreading in Poland – and also elsewhere, in Hungary, Russia, France, Germany, Sweden, and the US.

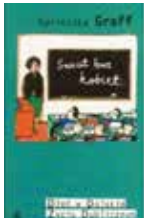
In the last few years, something has happened to the notion of gender in the Polish public debate. In 2013, for instance, the Polish bishop Tadeusz Pieronek stated, “Gender ideology is worse than communism and Nazism put together.”⁴ In 2013 “gender” also became the word of the year in Poland. In 2014, conservative politicians formed a parliamentary group called “Stop Gender Ideology”. Around the same time, a parental group called “Save the Little Children” (*Ratujmy Maluchy!*) argued against the Istanbul Convention, claiming that it imposes gender equality



Elżbieta Korolczuk is a sociologist, commentator, women's and human rights activist. She works at Södertörn University in Stockholm and teaches Gender Studies at Warsaw University. Her research interests involve social movements, civil society, and gender, and her most recent publications include two edited volumes, *Civil Society Revisited: Lessons from Poland*, co-edited with Kerstin Jacobsson (Berghahn, 2017) and *Rebellious Parents: Parental Movements in Central-Eastern Europe and Russia*, co-edited with Katalin Fábíán (Indiana University Press, 2017). For over a decade she was a member of the informal feminist group Women's 8th of March Alliance, and currently she is engaged in the association "For Our Children," fighting for changes in the Polish child support system, and serves as a board member of the "Akcja Demokracja" Foundation.

Writer, translator, literary critic, commentator, publicist, lecturer in gender studies at Warsaw University, feminist, women's activist, and co-founder of PK8M (Women's 8th of March Alliance) – **Agnieszka Graff's** career and importance can be described in numerous ways. However, as introduced by Jenny Gunnarsson Payne at the 2017 CBEES Annual conference, Södertörn University, Agnieszka Graff is above all a public intellectual who has contributed greatly to the debate on gender equality in Poland by revealing the absence of women in Polish public life, especially with her book "Świat bez kobiet" (*A World without Women*) in 2001. She has since published several other books: *Rykoszetem* [Stray bullets: gender, sexuality and nation] (2008); *Magma* [The quagmire effect] (2010); *Matka Feministka* [Mother and feminist] (2014). She is also the author of numerous articles on gender in Polish and American culture published in anthologies and academic journals, including *Public Culture* and *Feminist Studies*.





policies which are seen as a danger to children, and outside Poland, Pope Francis referred to gender identity as an “ideological colonization”. Suddenly, gender is at the center of public debate as politicians, clergymen, and other public figures refer to “genderism”, the “gender lobby” and “gender ideology”. Along with gender equality policies, feminism, the LGBTQ movement, sexual education and reproductive rights, ‘gender’ has been transformed into a great danger to Polish society. How did this happen?

“Initially we thought it was a misunderstanding. We thought the Right didn’t understand the word gender and that we as gender study scholars needed to explain it”, Agnieszka Graff tells. However, after a rather violent encounter with anti-genderism in the fall of 2013, when a group of men in the audience of a panel at the Dominican Church in Warsaw threw a smoke bomb and held up a banner with the words “Gender = 666”, Agnieszka Graff understood that “they’re not looking to be educated. This was a dividing line in the cultural wars that were happening in Poland.” After initially assuming that the war on gender was a local Polish, or at most a regional East European, phenomenon, Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk soon realized that it is instead transnational and well-organized, and that the producers of the discourse of anti-genderism are based in Western Europe – such as the German writer Gabriele Kuby, the Belgian theologian Marguerite Peeters and the French priest Tony Anatrella. This view, that anti-genderism is not something uniquely Polish, but a novel transnational phenomenon with local outcomes, brought Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk together and they have since published several texts on the topic, including their article “Towards an Illiberal Future: Anti-genderism and Anti-globalization” (published 2017 in *Global Dialogue*). However, they also share an interest in the politics of care, which they both connect to the Polish development of anti-genderism. At the center here is motherhood, or rather “motherhood as an institution, social practice, and experience, and the fact that the state in Poland has been ignoring the needs of mothers for decades”, according to Agnieszka Graff. Given that the Polish state for a long time has failed to make sure fathers actually pay child support, many single mothers struggle economically. A group of women from all over Poland thus initiated a grassroots movement fighting for their right to child support. Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk both took part in this movement as supporting activists and have also followed a series of debates which took place in the presidential place in 2012 concerning mothers’ social and economic demands. From these experiences Agnieszka Graff, remembers, “to these women it really didn’t matter whether the people trying to help them were right wing or left wing. All that mattered was that somebody would care for their issues. It is to some extent a historical coincidence that parental groups became ultra-conservative. If the left had been seriously interested in these issues, if liberalism had been attuned to these issues, they wouldn’t necessarily have gone in that direction. But the right had a feel for family oriented issues. During debates on specific issues, such as institutional child care or the child-support crisis, I found myself, to my own surprise, closer in my thinking to conservative women than women who claimed to be feminists but who were actually business-oriented. The neoliberal agenda was, basically, ‘parenting is your own private enterprise’. And from the other side, there were women claiming that millions of people in Poland felt abandoned by the state. So, two years later, these very same women were demonizing gender. It was an evolution,

but before the war on gender started, we found ourselves in dialogue with some of the people who would later demonize gender. Elżbieta Korolczuk today showed this genuine interest in their world view. It’s not like they demonize us and we want to demonize them – no, we really want to hear what they are saying.”

Is it possible, then, that the liberal left, and feminism itself, have contributed to this situation?

“I wouldn’t say contributed,” Elżbieta Korolczuk explains. “I think more in terms of leaving an empty space, which has been filled with right-wing discourse, so it is a case of negligence or marginalizing specific issues, such as motherhood and care. I mean, of course this configuration would play out differently in different contexts. In the Polish context, unfortunately, the left party and the post-communist social democratic party have been leaning towards a very neoliberal agenda, so when they were in power they liquidated the Alimony Fund, for example. It was due to the social mobilization of single mothers and the decision of the Law and Justice [PiS] government that the Alimony Fund was reestablished in 2007. These are the conditions in which we are working. Agnieszka and

I and some other feminists, including Iza Desperak, Sylwia Chutnik, and Julia Kubisa, have been working within the feminist movement to re-orient the discourse, because although there is a lot of discussion of reproductive rights, but for a long time there hasn’t been a discussion on motherhood, on how this care regime functions when someone really wants to have children, and what it means to be an impoverished parent. These questions have been marginalized. For feminist discourse, the question of family has always been problematic, but if we abandon the discussion about family, as a movement, then we miss out on a large portion of social policy which we should have on our

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agenda. And this is something we try to address within the feminist movement today.” Agnieszka Graff argues that they have been successful in this endeavor: “Initially, when we were introducing this topic into the feminist discussion, we were accused of conservatism. My book *Mother and Feminist* was attacked as a betrayal of feminism. The moment you start using the word family or motherhood, a lot of feminists say, you are selling out. So, it was a question of reframing that set of issues. What should feminists do? I would say, feminists should read Nancy Fraser – and Elżbieta Korolczuk! We should understand how issues of motherhood, how issues of care are central, and not just issues of freedom.”

Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk say they are not only trying to reach out to the feminist movement by making it aware of the complexity and the pragmatics of care issues, but that it is equally essential to address the left and the so-called liberal establishment in order to point out the ultimate importance of gender – liberal politics needs to take gender seriously and include it systematically. “We wrote this article for the largest Polish daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*,” Agnieszka Graff says. “We were explaining why gender matters, trying to alert the people who are now in the position of trying to defend democracy from the Kaczyński regime that they cannot ignore gender, and that it is not just about paying lip service to how wonderful and brave women are. But, of course, this is a very difficult task because, at least in Poland, there is this sense that there are the real political issues of democracy, freedom, transition – the big history that has been written by men – and then because we are civilized, we are pro-European, we also include women, but it is a kind of afterthought. I think it is symptomatic that our article for *Gazeta Wyborcza* got retitled by the editors as ‘The Polish Macron must be a woman’. The Left has a problem with thinking of gender systematically, as a set of social, cultural, and economic issues. Instead we have a discussion on who is going to win the next elections: will it be a male or female leader? Again and again, we who fight against anti-genderism find ourselves relegated by the liberal press into this tiny little corner called ‘women, children and sex-related topics’. I think that until the Left takes gender seriously, the Right will turn this topic to their advantage. Because gender is a hugely important topic which concerns the distribution of resources and dignity. Sweden is at least considered to have understood this long ago – or maybe that is a myth?”

As you have said, this is not only happening in Poland but also elsewhere including the US, and I can see it in Sweden – maybe not as much, but it is similar – that there is a feeling that the establishment has forgotten about me, and the feeling that “I am being accused of not being modern”.

“You put that beautifully, except I would replace the word ‘accused’ with ‘shamed’: I am constantly shamed for not being modern and I’ve had enough; I intend to be proud of the way I live my life,” Agnieszka Graff replies. Elżbieta Korolczuk, who lives in both Poland and Sweden, compares the two countries’ experiences of anti-genderism: “the main difference is that in a Swedish context the question of gender equality has been integrated into the national identity of being a modern nation among those who are not yet developed, which makes it problematic. The claim that those who oppose gender and queer studies have been marginalized is at least partly grounded here and I think this means something – you have that anti-systemic air around such claims, which is visible especially online in anti-feminist groups. In Poland, I would say, the right wing is fighting against a straw man because feminism and the feminist movement never have been as influential as they are claimed to be. Of course, we had successes and the Black Protest was important but, in terms of political influence we are still the pretenders to the political elite.” Here, Elżbieta Korolczuk again emphasizes the importance of and need for a feminism which aims at restructuring the very basis of society and which takes people’s life-worlds and concerns into serious consideration, rather than a feminism which only cares about quantitative equality.

Agnieszka Graff agrees: “Our feminism is community-based, left-wing in its attitude towards capitalism and not just left-wing in, let’s say, its attitude towards the Church. Poland has a Left party which, paradoxically, completely ignores economic issues. This is one of the reasons why I think the public’s opinion of feminism is that it is a form of individualism; that it is about getting those seats on boards of directors. Elżbieta in her presentation today used the word ‘alienation’, and it struck me how this is a double-edged word. On the one hand, it has a long tradition in Marxist theory as alienation in labour. On the other hand, it is a state of emotional abandonment – a feeling that you are unloved, that you are misunderstood and left out – and I think that anti-genderism became a magnet for feelings of alienation and nostalgia. People want the family and gender roles to be a space of predictability, of naturalness and community, and there is a strong demand for any talk about gender in the public sphere to confirm their pre-conceptions. For a long time, I have studied popular cultural discourses about gender in Poland and the US, and it is astonishing how pop sociobiology is filled with endlessly repeated stereotypes. No matter how many times these

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ideas are debunked, the books that promote them are best sellers. Women are monogamous, men are polygamous. Women are caring, men are competitive. It's all in your brain. All your preconceptions are true. Gender studies is a field of critical thinking which is, by definition, suspicious of such discourses, and so it arouses people's anger. People want the study of gender to be a confirmation of what they thought gender difference was all about, and so I don't think it is a coincidence that Judith Butler, for instance, arouses such fury. She is hard to understand and what she says is counter intuitive. So alienation and nostalgia, these are the public feelings that needed a language and anti-genderism became a language for expressing these feelings."

Would you say that feminism and the discussion on gender equality have been an enclosed academic debate not disseminated, or made relevant to people?

Elżbieta Korolczuk does not completely agree "If we think about leftist feminist activism, which I was involved in for a long time, I would say that we used the language of class struggle and social justice, which at that time seemed fresh, or even revolutionary, because the main stream was so neoliberal. The problem is that when I look at what I wrote five or ten years ago in the pamphlets which were distributed during demonstrations, and compare it with those which are distributed now, I see they basically use the same language. It is a language which appears transplanted from debates on the left which reflect the Marxist language of class struggle. And the only alternative became the language of identity politics, which refers to the uniqueness of individual experiences. So the problem is not so much that we are using the academic jargon, but that we don't develop new ways of communicating with

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the people. And it is interesting to see how popular feminist ideas can become when they are translated into a more accessible language – for example, through popular culture – and I think that actions such as #metoo show a great potential and a great need for retelling our feminist stories in more personal, emotionally compelling ways, which is something we never really had in Poland – compared to Germany, for example, where consciousness-raising groups have been very popular." Agnieszka Graff remembers how readers flooded her with emails once, after she had written an article on the topic of being a mother with a small child in a Polish hospital, and about being humiliated by doctors and nurses: "This was to some extent an essay about the horrors of the Polish health care system, but also about the invisibility of a woman once that woman is in the position of a mother. I received so many stories from women. There is clearly a desire to share these stories."

This makes me think of the Polish symbol "Matka Polka". How is it possible that, in a country where motherhood is almost worshipped, so many women report such treatment at hospitals and, as we said earlier, single mothers need to fight for their right to alimony?

"For that I actually have an answer!", Elżbieta Korolczuk exclaims. "Because – together with Renata Hryciuk – we have written about this in a book called 'Farewell to the Polish mother?'⁵ in which we argue that the Polish mother is venerated only when she is self-sacrificing. That is, sacrificing her own well-being, her happiness, her basic needs. The moment she starts making demands, the situation changes." Agnieszka Graff interposes that "the Polish mother is idealized because she makes no demands. Once she starts making demands, as a citizen, she is actually demonized as selfish, grabby, as making ungrounded demands – this is exactly what happened to the single

mothers who were asking the state for help with alimony." Elżbieta Korolczuk adds: "There is a class aspect here: what kind of mother do we really respect? We have seen a lot of hatred and disrespect for poorer mothers, and for less educated mothers, a Polish version of the 'welfare queen, discourse in the US'. There is a strong discourse of class division which is dressed up as a division between those who are truly respectable and those who are ungrateful and demanding, and of course those who are ungrateful and demanding always happen to be poor and are attacked for having made bad choices."

But given the recent mass protests such as the Black Protest, isn't there hope for change regarding women's needs and the position of feminism in Poland?

"For someone who has been doing feminism for years," Agnieszka Graff says, "what is happening is quite heartening. Yes, there is this huge anti-gender movement. But on the liberal and leftist side, everybody seems to identify with feminism today, and a lot of male pundits and politicians on the opposition side attach enormous importance to feminism as the possible savior of Polish democracy. On the other hand, this mobilization comes too late; the right wing has already consummated political effectiveness. I think there is a cause and effect relation between the war on gender in 2012–2014 and the electoral victory of PiS in 2015. In other words, I think that anti-genderism paved the way for the acceptance of this authoritarian regime. Anti-genderism mainstreamed populism in Poland:

‘the elite has shamed us and we need to regain our dignity’. A lot of this populist rhetoric in Poland was articulated in a language of gender, or rather anti-genderism, responding to Western protests against Polish homophobia, and it was considered a disrespect of the Polish national identity. I think that on the wave of that, plus of course the fear of refugees, Kaczyński took over. The Black Protests were of course wonderful – we both wept seeing the crowds and I was deeply moved by seeing tens of thousands in the streets saying what I have been saying mostly alone for a long time – but I think these protests came too late.”

Elżbieta Korolczuk agrees, but wants to place Poland in a larger, global, context: “You mentioned the refugee crisis, and I think this shows how much now depends on what is happening globally. In that sense, predicting the future becomes incredibly difficult. If not for the refugee crisis, anti-genderism and other trends would not be enough. But then the question is: is the way of re-traditionalization or right-wing populism the swan song of patriarchy, or is it the beginning of a new ice age? I think that we should look at the Black Protest and other mobilizations not so much in terms of the immediate effects they have but in terms of long-term changes in the ways people think. The Right have absolute power today but their anti-gender discourse is based on the idea that they are the victims – this notion becomes more and more empty and ridiculous. So the question is how this reconfiguration can play out in the long term. If there truly will be a strengthening, and self-identification of many women with feminism, then it can have consequences in the long run – given that there will be openings in the political opportunity structures in terms of parties which can win in the next elections. The next question then is: What will happen with the liberal elites? The reason why the Black Protest was so big was because the struggle of women has become reconstructed as a struggle against the regime, and that’s why they decided to support us. So the question is: What, in the long term, will be the consequences of seeing the feminist struggle at the forefront of progressive thought?”

And as a reply, Agnieszka Graff ends with a powerful remark: “We’re right back where we started. Our agenda – and we have made a vow to repeat it endlessly in various forms – is to convince the well-meaning, liberal left and defenders of democracy that gender is absolutely central to the current political debate. Not just because women deserve equality, and certainly not because women are morally superior to men, but because this is where the struggle is happening – gender is where recognition meets redistribution in the most politically explosive way.” ✖

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