

- 2 For the case of Sweden see e.g. D. Mulinari, “Gender equality under threat? Exploring the dilemmas of an Ethno-Nationalist Political party”, in L. Martinsson, G. Griffin, & K. Giritli Nygren (Eds.), *Challenging the myth of gender equality in Sweden* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016), 137–162; and for the cases of France, Italy and Netherlands see S. Farris, *In the name of women’s rights. The rise of femonationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- 3 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique,” *Signs*, (2013) 38:4, 967–991.
- 4 S. Farris, *In the name of women’s rights. The rise of femonationalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- 5 D. Keskin, “Criminalization of women’s mobilization & the punishing of gender studies”, in the themed issue “Threats Against Academic Freedom” *Baltic Worlds*, (2018), vol. XI, no. 4: 16–19.
- 6 See for example the themed issue “Gender Equality and Beyond: At the Crossroads of Neoliberalism, Anti-Gender Movements, “European” Values, and Normative Reiterations in the Nordic Model”, ed. L. Martinsson, K. Giritli Nygren, and D. Mulinari, *Social Inclusion*, (2018), vol. 6, no.4: 1–7.
- 7 A. Graff & E. Korolczuk, “Gender as ‘Ebola from Brussels’: The Anti-colonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism”, *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (2018), 43(4): 797–821.
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- 9 M. Fotaki and N. Harding, *Gender and the Organization. Women At Work in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2018).
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Sweden

by Anna-Maria Sörberg

GENDER HATE

As the new global family fundamentalism celebrated another victory while taking over the historic Gran Guardia Palace in Verona, Italy in March, the US’ news site *Buzzfeed* proclaimed “Italy is the clearest test of whether the same formula that brought the religious right back to influence in the White House can work in Western Europe” (March 28, 2019).

For three days, thousands of neo-conservative, authoritarian, religious right, and occasionally fascist Italians poured in and out through the culturally important city to show their support for the dream of a world that cherishes the heterosexual family and keeps national borders closed – the immigration issue being the second pillar of this movement.

What emerges as remarkable in the reporting is the introduction of three characters behind the big conference. Their three faces – an activist, a businessman, and a politician from three different movements and continents – are a perfect illustration of how today’s global anti-gender movements are positioning themselves.

There is Brian Brown from the eager US organization World Congress of Families (WCF), who has fought for a religious and authoritarian agenda since the 1990s. There is the skilled Russian networker Alexey Komov, with ties to Moscow’s central locus of political power, who has worked intensely, and for years, to find a way into European neo-fascist movements. In Italy he finally succeeded through Lega, the populist and fascist party that until recently was called Lega Nord. And there is Lega’s party leader Matteo Salvini – the third name – who swims like a fish in the water of the polarized media landscape and has managed to mobilize conservative Catholics, fascists, and “ordinary people” who are “deceived by power” in big numbers. This was the

consolidation of ultra-right wing global power that came together during three intense days in Verona.

In spite of the common dream of another Europe and another world, it is no easy job to connect and maintain such a large collection of anti-feminists and homophobes, conservative religious men, right wing populists and pure fascists. Sociologist Elzbieta Korolczuk, who was present in Verona and follows the anti-gender movements in her research, points out that the diverse and radical elements also caused problems for the organizers.

“In countries like Italy, they don’t want to present themselves as homophobes or against women’s rights, but rather emphasize that they are ‘only’ looking for ways to defend the family. The organizers subsequently had to apologize for the conference’s more extreme statements, such as “hell is waiting for the gay world”, says Elzbieta Korolczuk.

THREE WEEKS AFTER the meeting in Verona, Lars Adaktusson of the Christian Democrats in Sweden sat on a flight to Colombia’s capital Bogotá en route to a conference organized by the Political Network for Values – a close ally of the Verona conference organizer, WCF. The Christian Democrats’ foreign policy spokesperson was there to discuss an urgent subject: the persecution of Christians in the Middle East. But the meeting in the capital also meant that Adaktusson was able to assume the role of Swedish representative for conservative family alliance-building.

Here he was able to mingle with the country’s ex-president Alvaro Uribe, the family ministers of Hungary and Poland, and a number of representatives from the religious right in the US. Criticism in Sweden was nearly instant, indicating that mingling with homophobes, abortion opponents, and right-wing nationalists still



Brian Brown.



Alexey Komov.



Matteo Salvini.

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still comes at a political cost in Sweden.

“It is nothing new that ultra conservatives and religious alliances meet across party or organizational boundaries. But the force that today unites movements that have not previously been linked to each other is something new,” says ethnologist Jenny Gunnarsson Payne at Södertörn University, who has been tracking the global emergence of anti-gender movements for several years.

“In an environment of increasing authoritarian forces, we must stop rejecting them as disdainful of knowledge or as ignorant. They have their own form of knowledge construction with books, media, and conferences and their view of themselves is that *they* stand up for truth and knowledge. A truth that often overlaps with God.”

VERONA AND BOGOTÁ are two examples of an escalation of global revivalist meetings in which a number of requirements and proposals are formulated under a neo-conservative umbrella. Restrictions on the right to abortion, preventing sex

education in schools, and the promotion of a heterosexual family order as the foundation of the nation are the recurring elements. However, the meeting between conservative religious values and secular right-wing populism would never have succeeded without a common enemy. And this is where “gender ideology” comes in, according to Gunnarsson Payne.

In the magazine *New Statesman* (January 21, 2019), queer and political theorist Judith Butler reminds us that the present setback with respect to gender issues in itself demonstrates how much power the Vatican possesses. Butler has on several occasions been painted as the symbol of gender ideology and a threat to the nation in countries such as France and Brazil, and has been subjected to hate campaigns. Much has happened since the Vatican’s family council formulated an open letter to all the council’s bishops in 2004 with the aim of attracting attention to the threat of what was then termed “gender theory”. But it took almost ten years, and a number of attempts to create

a force behind the rhetoric, until the real breakthrough came.

It was in 2013, when France passed a national marriage act for same-sex couples, that the family-conservative wave finally went straight into the nation’s political center. Faced with the threat of the disintegration of French national identity, manifested as the heterosexual nuclear family, a conservative and religious mob took to the streets. And the symbol of the threat was called Judith Butler.

FOUR YEARS LATER meant another turning point. “Burn the witch”, “throw out gender ideology” chanted the religious and nationalistic mob outside a conference in Sao Paulo, as they burned effigies of Judith Butler, who was one of the speakers. When the former professional soldier Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil barely two years later, it was after a long election campaign marked by hatred of gender and LGBTQ rights. As minister of education in his new government, Bolsonaro appointed a 75-year-old Pentecostalist who is known for wanting to

ban gender issues and introduce “ethical counsels” in schools. And the first thing that minister of human rights, Pentecostal preacher Damares Alves, said after she was appointed was: “a new era has begun in Brazil, boys dress in blue and girls in pink”.

The idea of the dangerous and destructive “gender ideology” is now also the subject of an ongoing review from gender research. In February, some twenty researchers gathered for a symposium at the Center for Gender Studies at Uppsala University, where the image of an allegedly threatening gender ideology was confirmed time and time again as the main hate object for the conservative and neo-authoritarian wave.

Andrea Petö, professor of gender studies at the Central European University in Budapest, described how just over a year ago her discipline lost its accreditation after a long and systematic campaign by the Hungarian government. Ayse Gul Altinay of Sabanci University in Turkey talked about the work of defending and strengthening gender research, especially queer and intersectional perspectives, at a time when more and more intellectuals, activists and journalists are being sentenced and imprisoned for their work. Swedish, British and German researchers testified of a situation that has sparked increasing threats both to individual researchers and to institutions – one of the latest being bomb threats and a hoax bomb found in the gender secretariat’s premises in central Gothenburg. Professor Lena Martinsson, who works in Gothenburg, talked about her text analysis of the most eager Swedish representative of the anti-gender ideology – journalist Ivar Arpi. Arpi has repeatedly published articles on the front page of Svenska Dagbladet that claim to “expose” gender research as a non-scientific subject. In a secular version, Arpi presents a criticism of gender ideology, describing it as a “church” – an unscientific field that hides something very dangerous: a radical underlying project that wishes to transform our entire society in a single homogeneous, and post Marxist, direction.

Arpi is also one of the main contributors to a themed issue of the ultra-con-

servative newspaper *Världen Idag*, [The World of Today] which gathered some of the strongest opponents of gender ideology. In her pink jacket, the Christian Democrats’ party leader in Sweden, Ebba Busch Thor, explains that she has nothing against gender equality but wants to do away with “gender confusion”. Here, the picture of Sweden is painted as a country where gender ideology has been particularly strong and where dangerous “gender experiments” have been pushed much too far. In an interview, psychiatrist David Eberhard describes the censorship he thinks he suffered last year, when a reader added his own comments to an audio version of his book “The Great Gender Experiment”. Eberhard believes that this incident is part of a bigger trend in society. The risk that Ivar Arpi will be censored for his forthcoming book, where he claims to reveal how “gender ideology” took over Swedish universities, no longer seems very large. “I’ve never had such a big impact with anything I’ve written before,” says Arpi to the newspaper. Has the wind turned? *Världen Idag* thinks so, at any rate.

AFTER THE SWEDISH public service television (SVT) and the broadcast *Uppdrag Granskning* [Mission to Investigate] investigated the “gender change industry” in early April, the newspaper called the report “a unique turnaround in the public discourse”. The program focused exclusively on the supposed “hidden numbers” of young repenters, and that only a few who have sought help for gender dysphoria are openly visible. Throughout the program, the image of a country built on goodwill and good faith in the face of “new” ideas about gender and gender identity is drawn. It is a program that plays straight into the story of the vague but constantly formulated threat of distortion to children and young people. “May they awaken a broad and profound regret over this dark recent history,” writes *Världen Idag*.

The groups that drive the idea of a dangerous, destructive gender ideology are well organised and are gaining ground. But there are also counter movements that are growing stronger. All the re-

searchers who attended the symposium in Uppsala have been forced to adapt to a partly new climate but, at the same time, they point out the fact that the experience that has led to the emergence of authoritarian forces in countries such as Hungary, Turkey, Poland, Argentina, and Italy has also given birth to resistance strategies.

“The fanatics who make up anti-gender movements are often opposed to much that many people regard as basic human and democratic rights. The resistance can thus involve many beyond the feminist and queer movements,” says Jenny Gunnarsson Payne.

An important task, therefore, is to demonstrate that the authoritarian mobilization that is currently underway is entirely deliberate and to remember the values that are actually at stake in the form of basic sexual and reproductive rights.

Resistance strategies are born out of continued political mobilization, not from powerlessness. This was also the Turkish gender researcher Ayse Gul Altinay’s message at the conclusion of her speech:

“I have never been in doubt that I must stay behind in the country and fight. Everything we do in the streets and universities is important, everywhere. We organize, arrange pride marches, teach feminist theories. What is going on right now will ultimately yield results and lead to important change. I am convinced of that.” ✖

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Note: The anthropologist Ayse Gul Altinay who was interviewed in this text was sentenced on May 21, 2019, to 25 months in prison in Turkey for “having helped or supported a terrorist organization”. Read her statement about the sentence: <https://www.peace-ed-campaign.org/statement-of-support-for-ayse-gul-altinay-turkish-academic-for-peace-sentenced-to-2-years-and-1-month-in-prison/>