

Gender and Ethnonationalism: A New Era of Reproductive Choices and Constraints?

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The rise of ultra-nationalist movements in different countries is a phenomenon that can be witnessed all around the globe. Notwithstanding national specifics, international right-wing movements share ideas concerning the traditional family unit, ‘homelands’ and ‘human biodiversity’. Drawing from ethnonationalist thoughts and values, which they present in (social) media ventures as well as more mainstream publications, this international ‘right wing movement’ has managed to enter mainstream politics in many countries. However, neither the ethnonationalist movements themselves nor the gender concepts they have adopted have been the subject of scholarly scrutiny yet. Addressing this striking gap in current research, the interdisciplinary conference ‘Gender and Ethnonationalism: A New Era of Reproductive Choices and Constraints?’ aimed to deepen our understanding of the ideological and strategic core of these self-fashioned ‘movements’. The contributions focused on gender norms, women’s roles and concepts of reproductive decision-making espoused by these movements on their websites, in their media ventures and their publications. Participants represented various disciplines ranging from contemporary history, cultural anthropology and sociology to media studies and American Studies. In order to highlight the international and transnational links between the movements, the conference included papers focusing on the United States

and Europe as well as the global South.

In her brief opening remarks, ISABEL HEINEMANN (Münster) introduced the theoretical framework of decision-making and family planning as a social practice. Referring to the current assaults on women’s rights and human rights in general (couched as attempts to protect the ‘traditional family’) by ethnonationalist movements on the one hand and of growing civic protests against such tendencies on the other, Heinemann encouraged a comparative perspective: She asked panelists to discuss in how far the current successes of the Alt-Right, of populist and ethnonationalist movements around the globe threatened and challenged the arrangements of reproductive decision-making in liberal democracies through re-negotiations of knowledge, family planning, contraception, legal abortion, gender roles and women’s agency. In her keynote address, ALEXANDRA M. STERN (Ann Arbor), author of the essential study of the American Alt-Right’s gender concepts¹, showed that ethnonationalism was on the rise in different forms worldwide, using various channels of communication and action networks. According to Stern, the current discourse could be understood as a confrontation between advocates of nationalism on the one side and globalization on the other. Stern highlighted the importance of the categories gender and sexuality and stressed the differentiation between ‘gender traditionalism’ and ‘biological essentialism’ to analyze the ideas of ethnonationalist actors. Finally, Stern emphasized the importance of decoding the language and images used by ultra-right actors and identitarian movements in their social media outlets – such as white nationalist memes – to understand how ideas loaded with conservative notions of gender hierarchies entered the mainstream discourse.

The first panel – Antisemitism and Homophobia – focused on practices of exclusion within ultra-nationalist movements. AGNIESZKA GRAFF (Warsaw) provided an analysis of the anti-gender discourse in Poland while highlighting its anti-Semitic components. Graff convincingly argued that

¹ Alexandra Minna Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the American Alt-Right is Warping the American Imagination*, Boston 2019.

the combination of anti-genderism and anti-Semitism worked as an effective structural cultural code: While Jews appeared as 'traditional' enemies of mankind, gender concepts evoked by the Polish anti-gender movement were at the same time anti-modernist, pervasive and flexible. Due to this, the anti-Semitic trajectory of the discourse appeared as an issue of gender rather than race. Spurred by the economic crisis, Graff pointed out, the anti-gender discourse in Poland developed into a 'common denominator' between ultra-conservative religious and right-wing forces. KRISTOFF KERL (Cologne) analyzed how the far-right US-magazine 'Instauration' (1975–2000) and its editor Wilmot Robertson succeeded in discrediting homosexuality as an instrument of a Jewish dominated 'liberal-minority coalition' allegedly suppressing the 'white race'. Linking Jews to homosexual desires, the magazine presented them as the driving forces behind the 'gay-liberation movement'. By this, Kerl convincingly argued, both groups could be demonized within a white supremacist discourse that centered on specific notions of white heterosexual masculinity and the patriarchal family.

The second panel – Reproducing the Right Race – examined the biologicistic rhetoric of ethnonationalist movements with special regard to the role of reproduction. SIMON STRICK (Frankfurt am Main) analyzed the rhetoric of Alt-Right actors in social media. Referring to the concept of 'race realism', Strick pointed out how the Alt-Right sought to legitimize 'racist self-help' in order to defend white people from marginalization in 'their own country'. Using terminology borrowed from empowerment discourses of the social movements, this resulted in the quest for 'white male empowerment' and self-defense. A powerful symbol of these appropriations of left-associated symbols is the rainbow flag, now transformed into a symbol for the 'Ethnostate'. Strick argued for an in-depth analysis of the 'positive and empowering effects and scripts' evoked by the Alt-Right that encourage people to join the movement. ISABEL HEINEMANN addressed the family rhetoric of the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and identified

strong discursive continuities to National Socialism. While the party sought to present women primarily as reproducers whose duty it was to guarantee the survival of the German 'Volk', the AfD juxtaposed the alleged need for 'German babies' with the perceived menace of an 'Islamic birth Jihad' waged by migrants. For the AfD, as Heinemann demonstrated, family policies provided a relatively 'secure' terrain: Demands to contain the migrant birthrate and to restore the 'traditional' gender order were framed as legitimate 'pro-family policies'.

The third panel – Staging the 'Right' Women – showcased women as actors within ultra-nationalist movements. JUDITH GOETZ (Vienna) reviewed the image of women in the 'Identitarian Movement' in Austria and the ensuing discourse about feminism. While 'Identitarians' insisted on a seemingly 'natural' dichotomy of the sexes, they subscribed to an idealized, yet ambivalent image of femininity as pristine beauty and comrade as well as reproducer of the nation. In her paper, Goetz identified three different versions of 'Identitarian' feminism: While some adhered to a family-centered anti-feminism and vilified feminists as responsible for declining white birthrates and, thus, the 'Great Replacement', others embraced a genuine '*völkisch* feminism'. A third fraction espoused the notion of a 'real' right-wing feminism that insisted on 'real equality' within the confines of the biologist gender order of the 'Identitarian Movement'. ALEKSANDRA SYGNOWSKA's (Warsaw) case study of right-wing politician Beata Kempa explored the role of women within the Polish nationalist movement. As Sygnowska demonstrated, Kempa, a member of the Polish parliament for the PIS party, used to invoke 'politics of fear' that relied on racism as a political tool. Combatting liberal 'gender ideology', Kempa however claimed to expand women's political agency – within the confines of her idea of traditional femininity. To legitimize racist policies of exclusion, Kempa referred to images of Muslim misogyny and promoted a 'racialization of sexism', Sygnowska concluded.

Panel four – Ethnonationalism and its Challenges for Reproductive Justice – opened

with a paper by KRISTEN CHENEY (The Hague). She discussed surrogacy policies for gay couples in Israel as a compromise between pronatalist and nationalist strategies culminating in the image of the Jewish family. While Israel was the first country to legalize and officially subsidize surrogacy, the state conflated ideas of biogenetic relatedness and religion („Jewish babies“) into an even more vigorous idea of the traditional family. However, gay couples were excluded from the services of legal surrogacy in Israel but could turn to international surrogacy agreements instead. For Cheney, the discriminatory treatment of gay dads and their children demonstrated the hypocrisy of Israel's official 'pinkwashing' strategy. Next, JALLICA J. JOLLY (Ann Arbor) explored women's growing health activism in Jamaica in reaction to Donald Trump's reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule that restricted funding for NGOs in the field of family planning. Firstly, Jolly argued that the bodies and the sexuality of women of the Global South appear as 'strategic battlefields' of ethnonationalist movements. Secondly, Jolly contrasted the restrictive policies of the Trump era with the efforts of HIV activist women to claim legal abortion and contraception within the framework of a reproductive justice movement.

The fifth panel – Media Strategies of Ethnonationalist Movements – addressed social media as prominent sites of far-right discourses. JASMINE EHRHARDT (Ann Arbor) provided a close reading of the video 'The Streets of Paris' by Alt-Right Youtube personality Lauren Southern. While focusing primarily on Arab or black people who appear faceless and hostile, Southern provided an alluring illustration of the movement's master narrative of 'The Great Replacement' and its negative effects on the French capital. Quoting the aesthetics of travel videos and the 'go pro' camera, Southern's videos did not only appeal to everyday users, but were able to bypass the algorithms of Youtube aiming to detect xenophobic content. According to Ehrhardt, Alt-Right women used Youtube and other media channels to create viral content and emphasize their own role in a movement known for its open misogyny. In another vein, MRINAL PANDE (Mün-

ster) examined the gendered imaginaries of the Hindu nationalist ('Hindutva') movement in the course of the general elections in India in 2019. Addressing gender roles articulated in internet memes, tweets and Facebook posts she pointedly illustrated how Hindu nationalism embraced both sexism and misogyny: While women were depicted as devoted to motherhood and subordination ('mother India'), they were at the same time hailed as pure, selfless beings in need of male protection. According to Pande, gender hierarchies were reinforced with the help of humor, irony and parody in these imaginaries.

The concluding debate opened up new paths for further research at the intersection of gender and ethnonationalism. The participants suggested to expand intersectional, global and international comparative research that uses quantitative and qualitative methods as well as historical long-term perspectives to decode the role and manifestation of racism and gender norms in Alt-Right movements. They also cautioned that gender criticism or skepticism was widely used to camouflage racist intentions by these movements. Discussants widely endorsed media scholar JOHANNES VON MOLTKE's (Ann Arbor) claim that 'decoding' social media content produced by ethnonationalists, especially the role of memes and 'declension narratives', provided a new and important field for interdisciplinary cooperation.

The conference 'Gender and Ethnonationalism' provided a successful mix of interdisciplinary approaches and case studies dealing with the complex relations of gender and far-right movements. The participants identified the decoding and deconstructing of ultra-Nationalists' activities as a first step to counter their efforts against democracy, equal human rights and – not least – against gender research. For the first time, an interdisciplinary and international group of researchers pointed out the similarities and convergences of (anti-)gender discourse in nationalist movements on a global scale and paved the way for further transnational and interdisciplinary research. Above all, the conference demonstrated that a historical long-term perspective is indispensable for understanding contemporary ethnonationalism.

Conference Overview: Gender and Ethnonationalism: A New Era of Reproductive Choices and Constraints?

Keynote:

Alexander M. Stern (Ann Arbor): Gender and Ethnonationalism across the Atlantic: From the Alt-Right to Identitarianism

Panel 1: Antisemitism and Homophobia: Exclusionary Practices of Ultra-Nationalist Movements

Chair: Claudia Roesch (Washington)

Comment: Isabel Heinemann (Münster)

Agnieszka Graff (Warsaw): Jewish Perversion as a Strategy of Domination: A Preliminary Look at the Anti-Semitic Component of Anti-Gender Discourse

Kristoff Kerl (Cologne): The Conspiracy of ‚Homosexualization‘. Antisemitism and Homosexuality in the U.S. from the late 1960s until the 1990s

Panel 2: Reproducing the Right Race: Biologist Rhetoric of Ultra-Nationalist Movements

Chair: Marcel Brüntrup (Münster)

Comment: Alexandra M. Stern (Ann Arbor)

Simon Strick (Frankfurt am Main): Self-Help Racism: Interrogating the Concept of „Race Realism“ in Alt-Right Discourse

Isabel Heinemann (Münster): The Logic of Volk and Family: National Socialist Legacies and Women’s Place in the Rhetoric of the Alternative for Germany

Panel 3: Staging the ‘Right’ Women: Women as Actors in Ultra-Nationalist Movements

Chair: Mrinal Pande (Münster)

Comment: Heike Kahlert (Bochum)

Judith Goetz (Vienna): ‘Patriotism is not just a Man’s Thing’: Right-wing Extremist Gender Policies within the so-called ‘Identitarian Movement’

Aleksandra Sygnowska (Warsaw): Female Intermediaries in the Politics of Oppression

Panel 4: Ethnonationalism and its Challenges for Reproductive Justice

Chair: Johannes von Moltke (Ann Arbor/Freiburg)

Comment: Claudia Roesch (Washington D. C.)

Kristen Cheney (The Hague): Gay Israeli Dads and International Surrogacy: Pinkwashing Surrogacy Practices in the Name of Ethnonationalism?

Jallicia A. Jolly (Ann Arbor): Caribbean Women’s Health Movement & Resistance in the Era of Ethnocentrism

Panel 5: Media Strategies of Ultra-Nationalist Movements

Chair: Isabel Heinemann (Münster)

Comment: Johannes von Moltke (Ann Arbor)

Jasmine Ehrhardt (Ann Arbor): ‘France will not be France for Long’: Paranoid Reading and Recruitment to the Alt-Right

Mrinal Pande (Münster): A Gendered Analysis of Hindutva Imaginaries: Manipulation of Symbols for Ethnonationalist Projects

Concluding Debate

Chairs: Alexandra M. Stern (Ann Arbor), Isabel Heinemann (Münster), Mrinal Pande (Münster)

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