

The (Anti)gender Discourse of the Global Far-right. A Way of Introducing

Patriarchal masculinity cripples men. Manhood as we know it in our society requires such a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self, a turning away from whole areas of life, the man who obeys the demands of masculinity has become only half-human [...]. To become the man I was supposed to be, I had to destroy my most vulnerable side, my sensitivity, my femininity, my creativity, and I had to pretend to be both more powerful and less powerful than I feel.

Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies, and Realities*

On the 22nd of January 2021, a young man was arrested in the small seaport of Savona located on the coast of the northern Italian region of Liguria. The incident caused a relatively small ripple across national media and received very little international coverage. The young man in question, Andrea Cavalleri, had founded a successful extreme-right wing organization called ‘New Social Order’ (Nuovo Ordine Sociale) and used the Telegram messaging service to spread propaganda and recruit followers. Besides publishing numerous damning posts against Jews and left-wing politicians, Cavalleri’s objective was to increase the notoriety of the Incel movement, to which he claimed to belong, by slaughtering women during a pro-feminist rally since, as he declared, “Modern women are devoid of sentiment, just dolls made of flesh to be exterminated”. (https://genova.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/01/22/news/terrorismo_indagine_sull_estrema_destra_suprematista_a_savona_arrestato_22enne-283714514/). The sleepy town of Savona is not New York, London, or Paris, and yet Cavallari, thanks to the inexorable spread of social media, was on the verge of embarking on a killing spree worthy of Utøya or Christchurch. The names of those guilty of planning or carrying out bloodbaths inspired by extreme right-wing supremacist sentiment rarely stick in our minds, and the fleeting glory of their tweeted slogans soon fades. What remains is the growing unease caused by the sheer volume of unadulterated hatred seeping into our lives from the press, the media, and the internet.

Fuelled by dissatisfaction towards the relative empowerment of women and LGBTIQ constituencies in the West, this kind of reaction to changes in gender and sexual orders, albeit not new, has been bolstered by (and in itself, boosts) the recent global rise of far-right extremism. Cases such as that of Savona balloon across the globe and, although they cater to local specificities, much of their content and form circulate transnationally with little to no variation. Taking issue with the view of gender as socially constructed (which Lage and Márquez identify as the bedrock of what they call “the New Left”¹), detractors attempt to enforce a transcendent view of gender, one that is immutable, biology-driven, based on sexual dimorphism and well-established hierarchical roles for men and women – one in which there is not place for gay, lesbian, queer and trans folks.

¹ Agustín Lage and Nicolás Márquez, *El Libro Negro de la Nueva Izquierda: Ideología de género o subversión cultural* (Madrid: Grupo Unión, 2016).

The widespread hold of far-right extremism across the globe jeopardises the work of human rights and social justice and poses an encroaching threat to democratic societies by mainstreaming reactionary, racist, Islamophobic, xenophobic, and antigender political agendas and discourses.² In broad terms, in the current age of the Internet and Social Media, the far-right scenario appears to be undergoing a bi-directional shift towards the emergence of a mixture of transnational formalised political parties, such as the Sweden Democrats, Vox in Spain, Lega in Italy and the AfD in Germany, and a series of other far-right movements which have arisen in various settings, sometimes within parliaments and often as unrecognised groups in numerous countries.³ In much the same way as the previously mentioned lone wolf supremacists, by exploiting the online environment, these political entities can directly address their sympathisers and position themselves as the voice of their people.⁴ It is in these virtual environments that the discussion about and around gender politics is characterized by an opposition of emancipative contents, actions and institutions. More specifically, as Graff *et al.* highlight,⁵ when it comes to far-right movements “calls for national revival and unity invariably include appeals to [...] a sturdy masculinity, [...] heterosexuality as the only acceptable norm [...] and discipline”.⁶ Indeed, as Cynthia Enloe maintains when delineating the intricate link between nationalism and masculinity “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope”.⁷

A direct and inevitable consequence of such discourses has been the unwavering hostility of far-right groups towards gender equality and sexual liberation. By coalescing disparate political actors, civil society groups and institutions around the globe, these multifarious bodies united by core aspirations have set out on a moral crusade whose aim is to strengthen modern (and seemingly outdated) ideals, such as that of the nuclear ‘traditional’ family and the nation.⁸ ‘Agenda Europe’, a pan-European, Christian-extremist network is a fine example of this kind of congregational strategy and has, over the years, become a go-to point for traditionalist perspectives on sexual and reproductive rights. In their manifesto entitled ‘Restoring the Natural Order’, (<https://agenda-europe.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/rtno-2014.pdf>) the unnamed authors progressively dismantle the political ideologies that undermine ‘Natural Law’. Thus, Marxism, Feminism, Homosexuality, Gender Theory, Relativism and Anti-Discrimination are seen as “dangerous and destructive ideologies” (19). The manifesto goes so far as to put forward a glossary which claims to differentiate between ‘how *they* call it’ and ‘what it is’ (126) where, amongst others, the phrase ‘homosexual love’ is graphically redefined as ‘sodomy’ (129).

² According to Nairn, this opposition between political achievements in human rights and equality vs. the fight against such accomplishments characterises the idea of a nation itself. He views the nation as a ‘modern Janus’ with two highly contrasting ‘faces’: a conservative, jingoistic, ‘warfare’ visage vs. a more progressive, community-enhancing ‘welfare’ side. Along these lines, far-right movements would appear to be a feature of the more regressive half of Janus. See Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain. Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: New Left Books, 1977). See also: Joane Nagel, “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21.2 (1998), 242-269.

³ Michaela Köttig *et al.*, eds., *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-43533-6.

⁴ Lynn Berg, “Between Anti-Feminism and Ethnicized Sexism. Far-Right Gender Politics in Germany”, in Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston, eds., *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US* (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2019), 79–91. Richard Miskolci, *Batalhas morais: Política identitária na esfera pública técnico-midiática* (Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2021)

⁵ Agnieszka Graff *et al.*, “Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right”, *Signs*, 44.3 (2019), 541-560.

⁶ Graff *et al.*, “Introduction”, 551.

⁷ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 45.

⁸ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse* (London: SAGE Publications, 2020, 2nd edition).

Interestingly, these discourses repeat and foment contents, slogans, discursive formulae, tropes and topoi that travel transnationally but are, nonetheless, locally adapted within national borders. Instances of these boundless but still identifiable discursive products belonging to far-right parties can be found across the globe. For instance, the 2016 Colombian referendum whose aim was to ratify the peace agreement between the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the government was rejected by the population on the grounds that it would lead to a “flexibilization” of gender norms. Accounting for the fact that the armed conflict victimizes LGBTIQ people forty times more frequently than the heterosexual population⁹, the agreement aimed to further equality to all citizens, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. Demanding the term “gender” to be dropped from the text, Colombian Catholic authorities vociferously mobilized their forces to repel it while also requiring changes in the agreement to include religious institutions as vulnerable groups. These demands were not granted, and, by a small majority, the population voted against the peace agreement because that would supposedly lead to unrestrained sexual perversion. Examples such as this mushroom across the globe. The Brazilian ultraconservative politician Jair Bolsonaro became president due to his vitriolic speeches against women and LGBTIQ+ individuals to such an extent that he singled out the fight against ‘gender ideology’ as a political platform in his inauguration speech.¹⁰ In Hungary, gender studies programmes have been progressively dismantled in recent years. In France, Spain, Slovenia and Italy, self-identified guardians of good morals (i.e., *Strazarji*, *Sentinelle in Piedi*, *les Sentinelles*) have publicly demonstrated against progressive laws on same-sex marriage and abortion. Just a few days before the writing up of this introductory note, at a meeting in Ankara organised by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hosting the European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen and the European Council President Charles Michel, Ms von der Leyen was left standing as no chair had been provided for her. She was visibly taken aback when the two men sat on the only two available armchairs, relegating her to an adjacent sofa and hence preventing her from taking an active part in the talks. Video footage of the incident has elicited thousands of anti-Erdogan comments on social media platforms giving rise to the so-called ‘Sofa Gate’. No woman, let alone the European Commission’s first female President, should be on the receiving end of such thoughtless and shameful behaviour. Sadly, the incident is merely symptomatic of a deeply rooted disrespect for women not only within the Turkish establishment but wherever far-right parties rule the nation. In Peru and Panama, the Covid-19 pandemic was also used to further binary understandings of gender via restrictive measures limiting the circulation of women and men, who could access essential services on different days of the week. Such a policy led to the strengthening of transphobic violence.¹¹ According to Brazilian feminist anthropologist Sonia Corrêa¹², such sex segregation measures “reiterate the biological determinism of sexual dimorphism”, which undergird the antigender agendas of the far-right whose aim is to bring us “back to where we always have been.”¹³

The democratic expansion and emancipation yielded by recent changes in the patriarchal system of values have been increasingly met with suspicion, mistrust, and open and patent contempt by the far-right fringes of society that “see their own sexual anxieties reflected in the figure of the angry white

⁹ See Camila Muelle, “Como hacer necropolítica en casa: ideología de género y acuerdos de paz en Colombia”, *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad*, 27 (2017), 172-198.

¹⁰ See Rodrigo Borba and Danillo da Conceição Pereira Silva, “Swings and Scales of Democracy. The ‘Transgender Epidemic’ and Resistance to Antigenderism”, *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada*, 59.3 (2020), 1916-1945.

¹¹ Amaya Perez-Brumer and Alfonso Silva-Santisteban, “COVID-19 policies can perpetuate violence against transgender communities: Insights from Peru”, *AIDS and Behavior*, 24 (2020), 2477-2479.

¹² Sonia Corrêa, “Back to Where We Always Have Been: Sex/Gender Segregation to Contain COVID-19”, *Engenderings*, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 9 Abril 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/04/09/back-to-where-we-always-have-been-sex-gender-segregation-to-contain-covid-19/>

¹³ See Corrêa, 2020.

straight cis man” typically embodied by the leaders political extremist movements.¹⁴ As César and Duarte argue,¹⁵ when the war is both political and moral, gender, sexuality, and sexual diversity soon become weapons. As a consequence, such groups discursively enact de-democratising dynamics that counter global political achievements in the fields of gender equality and freedom. However, as Borba and Silva underline,¹⁶ following Butler,¹⁷ such democratic achievements in the human rights cannot easily be destroyed. Therefore, polarized and dichotomous discourses shape and reshape the public sphere and its participation structures: far-right conservative ideologies are met by resistance as well as forms of counter-discourses that (re)negotiate specific meanings and values. Such processes are of course magnified by the recent affordances provided by social media which allow for the amplification of these discursive phenomena.¹⁸

By foregrounding gender (or, rather, the various facets of antigenderism) in the linguistic and semiotic practices of right-wing extremists in places as diverse as Latin and North America, Europe, and East Asia, this issue of *Anglistica AION* investigates discourses and practices that are integral to far-right masculinist ideology. The moral crusade enacted by far-right groups and movements against gender equality aims to preserve heteronormative family ethics, gender values, and the naturalised hierarchies of the traditional roles of men and women. These lynchpins represent the essence of far-right resistance, as reported in the differing national and cultural settings of the contributions that make up this volume. Clear-cut definitions of what constitutes far-right activism and ideology are difficult to establish, mainly due to the far-right’s ability to permeate all social strata and numerous civil society organisations, but with a specific preference for political settings. In these contexts, the far-right earns accolades from significant chunks of a nation’s electorate largely affected by deep-rooted dissatisfaction, cynicism, and outright rejection of political, business and banking elites.¹⁹ Perhaps, a distinction can be drawn between the radical right, which is opposed to liberal aspects of democracy (such as minority rights), but does not usually promote the use of violence, and the far-right, which is inherently anti-democratic and, in many cases, legitimises the use of violence to pursue its political aims.²⁰ However, moving beyond minimal definitions, there is no doubt that the prevalence of far-right extremism in a country’s institutions and organisations produces a set of adverse factors, which include antifeminist misogyny, toxic masculinity, and the centrality of anti-gender equality.²¹

Within these far-right scenarios, while narratives of femininity evoke and replicate associations with emotional vulnerability, personal and professional incompetence, and the need to protect white

¹⁴ Borba and Silva, “Swings and Scales of Democracy”, 1919.

¹⁵ César and Duarte, “Governo e Pânico Moral”, 144. As cited by Fernando Altair Pocahy and Thalles do Amaral de Souza Cruz, “Gender and Sexuality in the Brazilian Educational Rhizome. A Cartogenealogy of Production, Marking and Governance of Difference”, in Moira Pérez and Gracia Trujillo-Barbadillo, eds., *Queer Epistemologies in Education. Luso-Hispanic Dialogues and Shared Horizons* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 110.

¹⁶ Borba and Silva, “Swings and Scales of Democracy”, 1919.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard U.P., 2015). DOI: 10.4159/9780674495548.

¹⁸ Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate. Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Naples: Paolo Loffredo Editore, 2020). Luiz Paulo Moita-Lopes and Joana Plaza Pinto, “Colocando em perspectiva as práticas discursivas de resistência em nossas democracias contemporâneas”, *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada*, 59 (2020), 1590-1612.

¹⁹ Akkerman Agnes et al., “How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters”, *Comparative Political Studies*, 47.9 (2014), 1324-1353.

²⁰ See: Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005); Martin Durham, *White Rage. The Extreme Right and American Politics* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Duncan McDonnell and Annika Werner, *International Populism. The Radical Right in the European Parliament* (London: Hurst, 2019).

²¹ Graff et al., “Introduction”, 551.

womanhood, narratives of masculinity are associated with the hegemonic struggle to preserve patriarchal rights, triggered by the fear of emasculation, loss of manhood, and declining (white) male privilege. This volume therefore explores how notions of ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’ are exploited as symbolic capital, ideological resource, and/or as a rhetorical device not only to problematise and marginalise the antagonistic ‘Others’, identified as ethnic, political, religious, or gendered threats to a desired uniformity, but also to legitimise and validate prejudices as well as particular forms of gendered violence.

This gendered aspect of the far-right appears to remain largely unquestioned as antifeminist and antigender-equality sentiment continue to mark nationalist policies and rhetoric.²² Such opposing attitudes not only underpin the populist and extremist mobilisation that unceasingly wages a ‘culture war’ against the ‘Other’, but also shape public opinion and policy debate on a range of issues, from immigration and reproductive rights to social protection and constitutional reform. In recent years, a number of internationally recognised studies have provided well-documented accounts of how these issues are perceived and exploited by the far-right in different countries, most often to generate fear, and spread misinformation and conspiracy theories.²³ In other accounts, the construction of far-right antigender representation filtered through extremist intolerance, has been given a distinct focus.²⁴

It is within this wider debate that conflates gender with far-right resentment that this issue of *Anglistica AION* pursues its aims. The contributions all contend a common denominator: the need to remain vigilant and steadfast when dealing with the far-right crusade against gender equality. In all the case studies in this issue, the essence of far-right resistance is embodied by a political agenda that aims to preserve heterocisnormative family ethics, traditional gender values, and the naturalised hierarchies of the conventional roles of men and women. It is against this background that the scholars whose work makes up this edited publication have approached the far-right centrality of gendered arguments and gendered policies. Through various well-established approaches in sociolinguistics (such as Corpus Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Anthropology to name but a few), each contribution analyses the importance of gender within far-right rhetoric, yielding subject matter that is both insightful and original.

This issue of *Anglistica AION* opens with the paper “Discursive Constructions of the Enemy through Metonymy. The Case of *CitizenGo*’s Anti-genderist E-petitions” by Stamatina Katsiveli (Queen Mary University of London, UK) and Elvis Coimbra-Gomes (Queen Mary University of London, UK). The authors investigate the transnational online petition platform *CitizenGo.org* by combining corpus linguistics methodologies and critical discourse analysis in the examination of metonymic variants related to gender identity and sexuality. Katsiveli and Coimbra-Gomes cogently show how these far-right E-petitions repurpose progressive vocabulary for regressive ends. Metonymy

²² See, however, Eric Russel, *The Discursive Ecology of Homophobia: Unravelling Anti-LGBT speech on the European Far Right* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2019).

²³ See: Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2007); Paul Hainsworth, *The Extreme Right in Europe* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2008); Bob Clifford, *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2012); Mammone *et al.*, eds., *Varieties of Right-Wing Extremism in Europe* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Sabine von Mering and Timothy Wyman McCarty, eds., *Right-Wing Radicalism Today: Perspectives from Europe and the US* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*.

²⁴ See: Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke U.P., 2017); Neil Datta, *Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists’ Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Forum, 2018). Retrieved online from www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/rtno__EN_epf_online_2021.pdf (last accessed December 15, 2020); Graff *et al.*, “Introduction”.

offers the discursive grounds for this kind of semiotic work by providing semantic flexibility to antigender propaganda.

“Back to the Future? The Tradwives Movement and the New Forms of Conservative Consensus Building” by Bruna Di Sabato (University of Naples Suor Orsola Benincasa, Italy) and Bronwen Hughes (University of Naples “Parthenope”, Italy) zoom in on the role of conservative women in countering feminist views of gender. The authors integrate methodologies and approaches drawn from Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics to investigate the online ‘Tradwives’ movement. By exploring different discourses and ideologies, they progressively reveal forms of kid-gloved nationalism and gender discrimination.

The paper “‘Beautiful, Maidenlike and a Housewife’: Gender in the Rise of the Far Right in Brazil” by Douglas R. Knupp Sanque (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) focuses on how the friction between different forms of femininity in Brazilian politics opened the discursive avenue for the rise of Jair Bolsonaro and his misogynistic rhetoric. In particular, the author investigates the textual trajectories of a magazine article about the trophy wife of former president Michel Temer and how it pitched a traditional form of femininity against the unconventional gender performances of Dilma Rousseff during her impeachment trial. The author thus demonstrates how the conservative performance of gender helped discursively construct Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment and was later implemented into the complex neofascist discursive rhetoric that led to the election of Jair Bolsonaro.

In her paper “The Vilification of the ‘Squad’: The Discursive (De)Construction of Women in U.S. Far-Right Media”, Margaret Rasulo (University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, Italy) investigates which discursive strategies are deployed in the headlines, images, and reader comments of the popular far-right *Breitbart News Network* website in the representation of the four first-term Democratic women of colour (i.e., Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts), referred to as the ‘Squad’. In her contribution Rasulo illustrates that the ensuing representation intentionally provoked a vitriolic response from *Breitbart’s* readership.

In “‘Unicorns’, ‘Narcissistic Snowflakes’ and ‘Undifferentiated’ Citizens. Gender in YouTube-Populism. The Case of *Lega Nord* and UKIP” by Serena Santonocito (University of Naples Parthenope, Italy) investigates the transnational discursive representation of gender in the context of social networking sites. Using quantitative and qualitative approaches, the author zeroes in on the official YouTube channels of UKIP (UK) and *Lega Nord* (Italy) to scrutinize how these parties use antigender rhetoric to discursively mobilize discriminatory views and uncivil behaviours from their supporters.

Last but far from least, Ping-Hsuan Wang (Language Training & Testing Center, Taipei, Taiwan), in the contribution titled “Populism against Same-Sex Marriage in Taiwan. Integrating Stance-taking and Framing in Facebook Posts and Comments”, articulates the ‘stance triangle’ (evaluation-positioning-alignment) and frame theory with a view to analysing the way in which populist discourses linguistically construct a singular ‘people’ against ‘the elites’. Pitting the authentic (i.e. heterosexual) ‘people’ against ‘elites’ that supposedly aim to destroy the status quo, as Wang illustrates, is strategically achieved by the Coalition of Happiness for Our Next Generation’s (CHONG, 下一代幸福聯盟) stance against same-sex marriage (SSM) in Taiwan, who uses social media to amplify the reach of its bigotry.

Together, the papers in this special issue of *Anglistica AION* paint a vivid (albeit terrifying) portrait of our contemporary times. Importantly, they illustrate that attending to the intricacies of discourse, rather than being an epiphenomenon of the recent global rise of far-right extremism, is one of its central dimensions. It is through the rather convoluted ways far-right actors discuss gender that they manage to forge thwarted images of human rights demands, mobilising ever bigger factions of the

population against gender equality and sexual diversity. The complexity of the contexts investigated here attest to the sophisticated ways through which far-right extremists develop transnational modes of action, tropes, figures, rhetorical forms, and concepts that are yielded in attempts to halt the empowerment of minoritized groups worldwide. Investigating the (anti)gender discourse of the global far-right may be painful but is a necessary step to garner the impetus to counter-act. We hope this special issue contributes to this end.