Anti-egalitarian activism: A contribution towards conceptualising the opposition to gender and sexual equality in Europe

The argument that language constructs reality has been one the central assumptions of feminist theory and politics for a long time. Language in general and discourse as a particular instance of language structuring and signification have been perceived as social practices through which inequalities based on gender and sexuality have been re/produced. Stemming from the same assumption of the interplay between discursive and social, conscious and intentional intervention into language has figured as one of the crucial means of challenging the unequal social relations pertaining to gender and sexuality. In other words, the strategic intervention into language through the practice of resignification, re-appropriation, and the use of self-reflexive politics of naming has been regarded as an important way of intervening into the patriarchal and heteronormative social systems.

The practice of conceptualisation is yet another example of a discursive practice that participates in producing and transforming the social and political landscape through the meaning-making process. What follows from this perspective is that the way in which we - feminist scholars and activists – name and conceptualise the recent transnational mobilisation against the movement towards greater gender and sexual equality represents not only an extensive analytical work, but also, and at least equally important, it constitutes a significant intervention in the ongoing struggle taking place in the context of what Éric Fassin (2010; 2016) terms as sexual democracy. As Fassin suggests, in the context of sexual democracy the notions of gender and sexuality are perceived as political issues that are disputed over within the democratic framework (Fassin, 2016, p. 178). Thus, the current so-called ‘anti-gender’ mobilisation and the response it has received, be it in the form of scholarly analysis or media coverage, can be regarded as parts of democratic struggle on how to arrange social relations pertaining to gender and sexuality. In this sense, our current and future practices of naming and conceptualising the social activism against the movement towards greater gender and sexual equality is always already (as well) political, having direct effects on the social, cultural, and political landscapes.

When it comes to particular terms, concepts, and meanings present in the existing feminist studies and critical media reflections dealing with this recent mobilisation against the so-called ‘gender ideology’, we can find several labels dominating these spheres. Some of the designations, such as ‘conservative’ and ‘traditionalist’ situate this movement in relation to the existing right-left/conservative-progressive political
struggles. Another term that has been occasionally used is the adjective ‘clerical’, drawing our attention to the religious underpinnings of this mobilisation. Finally, the most widely used term, especially in the feminist scholarly discourses on this topic, is the adjective ‘anti-gender’, utilised in the phrases like ‘anti-gender mobilisation,’ anti-gender movement’, ‘anti-gender discourse’, or, simply, ‘anti-genderism’. This concept, unlike the previous ones, diverts attention to the implied target of the movement in question and, perhaps more importantly, it raises the issue of the potential strategic use of the notion of gender as a ‘symbolic glue’ in this context, the one that helps to link together different aims in a coherent politics (Kováts and Põim, 2015).

As we can see from this brief overview, all the different terms and concepts that have been used so far in the critical scholarly work and media discourses produced completely different meanings about the recent mobilisation against feminist and LGBTIQ politics. However, what is also visible is that none of these terms explicitly indicates the direct implications that this social organising could have, and, in some cases already has, on the attempts to end the unequal power relations on the grounds of gender and sexuality. In this paper, I will argue that in the context of ongoing political struggles over the issue of gender and sexuality, the use of terminology that would more directly pinpoint the concrete social effects of this mobilisation could be politically more productive. In this regard, I will explore the potential explanatory power of the notion of anti-egalitarian activism as a concept that explicitly points out the potential negative social effects of this mobilisation that diverts, forestalls, and openly opposes movement towards greater gender, sexual, and tans* equality.

As I will argue in the paper, the political capacity of the notion of anti-egalitarian activism lies in its ability to clearly point out the underlying exclusionary tendency present in the apparently supportive ‘pro-family’, ‘pro-life’, ‘pro-tradition’ rhetoric. In particular as I will show, the use of affirmative discourse as a dominant rhetorical strategy tends to conceal the underlying opposition to gender and sexual equality and negation of rights as an actual effect of this mobilisation. I will argue that by using the notion of anti-egalitarian activism for this kind of mobilisation that negatively impacts the movement towards greater gender and sexual equality would repeatedly bring the issue of harmfulness of this kind of activism for the lives of women and sexual/gender minorities to the light. This could, in turn, potentially open a crack in the dominant political discourse saturated with the notions of ‘conservative’ and ‘right wing’, and push the debates more towards what has been at stake in the context of these struggles, and that is (in)equality based on gender and sexuality.

In what follows, I will first discuss the notion of equality and its historical and cultural trajectories in the context of Europe, with the special focus on the ways in which gender, and, subsequently, sexual equality have been used in creation of European Union’s identity. I will then move to the particular
campaigns, demands, and arguments posed in the context of mobilisation against the movement towards greater gender and sexual equality, and carefully analyse, by using the analytical tools of critical discourse analysis, the underlying assumptions behind the affirmative claims. I will show that, contrary to these affirmative claims made by the participants of this mobilisation, what has been at stake is the larger notion of equality in relation to the categories of sex/gender and sexuality. In the final section, I will reflect on the concepts and labels used so far in the critical accounts of this mobilisation, and discuss the potential usefulness of the concept of anti-egalitarian activism in the context of sexual democracy.

**Gender and sexual equality in the making of European Union**

Movement towards greater gender and sexual equality is embedded in the founding documents of the European Union, defining the EU as a place where the values of gender equality and non-discrimination are nurtured, and producing the ground for the introduction of the gender mainstreaming policies. However, although gender equality was taken on board from the early days of creating the community of European states, non-discrimination on the grounds of sexuality started to be incorporated in the EU values framework more recently. It was only in 2000 when the issue of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation was tackled for the first time,\(^1\) requiring all current and future member states to include the measures concerning the sexually-based discrimination in the field of employment in their laws (Kochenov, 2007). Thus, although the particular legal arrangements concerning family, marriage, and civil partnership are still in the domain of national legislation, the common EU framework imposed particular requirements regarding gender and sexual equality standards. This can partly explain why the similar set of anti-discrimination and pro-equality policies have been introduced in different member states, thus gradually diminishing the differences between them, and increasing the number of states that either have laws that install marriage equality, or provide some sort of recognition of same-sex partnerships.

***TO BE ADDED: Extended discussion of the historical and cultural trajectories of the notion of equality, and gender equality in particular***

**Organising against gender and sexual equality: Connecting the national and EU levels**

There is no doubt that in recent years the resistances to feminist and LGBTIQ demands for gender and sexual equality in Europe have become more visible, better organised, and certainly much better transnationally connected, involving more actors and organizations than ever. What may be regarded as contributing to the increased intensity and dynamics of this social activism is the way in which different

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\(^1\) Discrimination against sexual minorities as an issue was for the first time directly addressed in 2000 when both the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* and the Employment Equality Framework Directive 2000/78/EC set up a clear agenda against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.
actors, from civil society organisations, party members, and religious organisations and officials, have been borrowing, modifying, complementing, and expanding each other’s rhetoric and political actions (Hodžić and Bijelić, 2014; Zacharenko, 2016).

As a quick look on the recent mobilising against the feminist and LGBTIQ politics in Europe reveals, this mobilisation has been taking place in a range of Eastern European states such as Poland, Slovakia, and Balkan states, as well as in the countries of Western Europe, which have adopted a wide scope of LGBTIQ rights, such as France and Germany. What has also been noticeable are striking similarities in the applied strategies, accompanied by the visual and discursive resemblances, and the choice of almost identical targets present in different EU countries. One of the most obvious examples is the way in which the party discourse and visual documentation present in the context of ‘La Manif pour tous’ [Demonstration for all] series of protests across the France against the ‘marriage for all’ act proposal and so called ‘gender theory’ (Fassin, 2016) travelled to other local contexts. A series of protests ‘Demo für Alle’ [Demonstrations for All] in Stuttgart, besides the same slogan, had almost identical visual identity reflected in the use of light blue and pink colours accompanied by the logo in the shape of a heterosexual nuclear family with two children (Blum, 2015). The same mix of colours and the matching logo marked the referendum campaigns against same-sex marriage in Croatia and Slovakia, and it was also used in a recent European Citizens’ Initiative ‘Mum, Dad and Kids’ that asked for a single definition of marriage and family based on the heterosexual coupling and/or biological descent.

There have been several particular bases of social mobilisation, which directly targets laws and policies leading towards greater gender and sexual equality, appearing simultaneously in different national contexts as well as on the EU level. These specific targets include laws that promote marriage equality by allowing for the same-sex marriage; sexual education programs that promote freedom of sexual expression and teach against the discrimination on the grounds of gender and sexuality; and laws and policies securing the reproductive autonomy that includes the access to safe and legal abortion on demand. In addition to the attempts to influence the legal and policy sphere, what has also been opposed are particular feminist conceptions of gender and sexuality that have been negatively targeted as ‘gender ideology’.

The campaigns against these issues took place in different countries across Europe and they involved diverse forms of action, from public protests and other forms of public campaigns, national and EU-wide citizen’s petitions, to the initiatives to put some of these issues on the referendum. However, notwithstanding these organisational differences, there has been a striking similarity in the rhetoric that has been applied in relation to the particular targets appearing across the different actions and contexts. One of the main constitutive features of this rhetoric that cuts across different forms of organising, different targets, and different national contexts is the systematic use of affirmative language in self-
representation, hiding in this way the implied harmful effects of this mobilisation on women, and gender and sexual minorities.

**Affirmative rhetoric and negation of rights: Against the gender and sexual equality**

As Éric Fassin (2016), writing about the 2012/2013 protests against the ‘marriage for all’ act proposal in France notes, the rhetoric was shaped in the way that would prevent the potential interpretation of these protests as being driven by homophobia. While trying to avoid any association with homophobia, ‘the protesters’ signs insisted that they were pro-marriage, not anti-gay, and that their sole concern was the well-being of children’ (p. 175). Moreover, the strategic attempt to create supportive meanings around La Manif pour tous (Protest for all) movement is already signalled in its name, which is a playful re-design of a ‘marriage for all’ proposal, and which can be read as the promotion of the right to protest and public expression of disagreement with governmental policies that is being valued as one of the main principles of democracy.

Pro-marriage, pro-family, pro-children, and even pro-democracy rhetoric seen in France has also constituted a backbone of the anti-gay marriage campaigns across the Europe. For example, Slovenia, the whole purpose of the coalition with the alleged pro-children agenda ‘Za otroke gre’² (Children are at Stake) in 2015 was to challenge, by the means of referendum, the Bill to Amend the Marriage and Family Relations Act that extended marriage and adoption rights to same-sex couples. Thus, although this anti-gay marriage movement openly called the voters to vote ‘against’ the bill on the referendum, the dominant pro-children and pro-family rhetoric can be regarded as an attempt to conceal their anti-equality agenda.

Similar strategy of hiding the anti-gay marriage orientation behind the supposedly affirmative pro-family stance was also seen in 2013 marriage referendum in Croatia initiated by the civil initiative ‘U ime obitelji’ (In the name of the Family). As its very evocative name suggests, the initiative based its demand to include the exclusionary definition of marriage as a union of a man and a woman in the Constitution on the endlessly repeated mantra that they are not against anybody; instead, they argued, they are for the marriage, for the family, and for the well-being of children. Even the choice of action – initiating referendum – and the associated proposal of a referendum question were carefully designed in the way that would put this anti-gay marriage initiative in the ‘pro’ camp, and allow them to campaign for the ‘constitutional protection of marriage’, and not against the marriage equality bill as their Slovenian counterpart did. Finally, what Croatian and Slovenian initiatives also had in common with the French anti-gay marriage movement was the pro-democracy discourse that allowed them to represent themselves as

² In the meantime, the coalition ‘Za otroke gre’ was transformed into ‘Gibanje za otroke in družine’ (Movement for Children and Families)
working towards consolidating democracy in these post-socialist contexts. In Croatia, the pro-democratic discourse went so far as to call the anti-gay referendum a ‘holiday of democracy.’

However, that the use of pro-family discourse in the anti-gay campaigns does not feature only in the isolated national contexts shows the recent ‘Mum, Dad, and Kids’ European citizens’ initiative, targeting all EU member states. In particular, the action has been represented as a ‘European citizens’ initiative to protect marriage and family’\(^3\), calling people to ‘support marriage and family in Europe’, by giving their support to ‘an EU regulation that defines the meaning of marriage and family: marriage is a union between a man and a woman and family is based on marriage and/or descent’.\(^4\) The initiative thus employs the same rhetorical strategy of using the affirmative discourse while aiming at defining the marriage and family in the way that would deprive same-sex couples of equal rights granted to their heterosexual counterparts.

Affirmative campaigns that are in fact directed toward negation of rights are not unique to anti-gay actions. This sort of supportive language in the form of ‘pro-life’ discourse has constituted a backbone of the anti-abortion movements for a long time. Pro-life discourse that is based on the argument that life starts with the conception and that abortion is therefore a murder has been increasingly present in the past couple of years in Europe, being a part and parcel of the activities carried on in the context of transnational mobilisation against feminist politics of gender and sexuality.\(^5\)

***TO BE ADDED: Brief discussion of how the restriction of the access to safe and legal abortion on demand negatively impacts gender equality***

Another attack on both gender and sexual equality comes in the form of anti-gender ideology discourse. As the existing studies dealing with the growing resistance to the so-called ‘gender ideology’, or ‘gender theory’ as it is called in France, note, it is a discourse directed against the very concept of gender (Bracke and Paternotte, 2016; Fassin, 2016). The problem with the notion of gender lies in the way in which it conceptualises the differences between men and women as being socially produced and contingent, and not based on some pre-social ‘nature’ of sex.

Although this time the rhetoric is not based on the affirmative discourse, negative implications of anti-gender ideology actions for equality still remain carefully hidden. In this case, the proclaimed target is not equality, but an ideology with all the negative connotations that this term carries, from being something that is imposed, to the view that the claims made from such ideological position are not based on, and even contradict, the scientific evidence. This framing allows for depiction of anti-gender ideology actions as

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\(^3\) [http://www.mumdadandkids.eu/](http://www.mumdadandkids.eu/)

\(^4\) Ibid., emphasis in the original.

\(^5\) As an illustration, in recent years the ‘March for Life’ actions have been mushrooming in Europe, while the ‘protection of human life from conception’ has underpinned the 2012 European citizens’ Initiative ‘One of us’
something that can only have positive effects on social relations due to their ability to expose the supposed hegemony of false and unscientific assumptions. However, a close look into the line of argumentation underlying the anti-gender ideology rhetoric reveals that the actions against so-called gender ideology represent yet another instance of forestalling the movement towards erasing the unequal relations of power based on the perceived sexual differences. Thus, the short video entitled ‘Gender Ideology in a Less Than 3 Minutes’, created by the La Manif pour tous Italia, suggests that one of the negative consequences of gender ideology would be that

[...] in the school, that is, far from the family, children could be thought how to mix everything that can be typical for a boy or a girl. Yes, one dad could wear a dress and put a lipstick on his lips, girls could drive a truck. A baby can have two mums or two dads.

As this short quote shows, what has been perceived as one of the most unwanted effects of the conceptualisation of the unequal power relations between men and women through the concept of gender is the potential destruction of some essential sexual differences. This, according to the logic of anti-gender ideology discourse, would open up a space for same-sex families and trans rights, and, perhaps most interestingly, it would challenge the traditional gender roles. That the existing stereotypical gender roles are not the issue in the context of this anti-egalitarian movement can also be seen from the ways in which the work of the Croatian Ombudswoman for Gender Equality on challenging the gender stereotypes and gender employment gap was critiqued by ‘In the Name of the Family’ organisation. Thus, addressing the Ombudswoman’s recommendations for raising the employment rates for women aged 40 to 60, the presidents of the organisation states that

Ombudswoman didn’t provide a single argument which would substantiate the conclusion that women of that age reluctantly choose to focus on their family instead of their career, nor why would this be harmful for women or for society.

As this short quotation shows, the life choices that women make are perceived in terms of a free choice according to one’s personal preferences and having nothing to do with the existing stereotypical gender roles.

***TO BE ADDED: Discussion on how the notion of gender has been conceptualised in order to bring to light the ways in which the unequal relations between men and women have been re/produced; also, the

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6 The video, accompanied by Croatian subtitles, is embedded in the media article against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against the women and domestic violence) in Croatia. The author of the article is Ivan Munjin, one of the main project leaders in the ‘In the Name of the Family’ organisation, an organisation that arose from the aforementioned Croatian initiative. Available at http://narod.hr/hrvatska/sto-istanbulska-konvencija-koju-zeljela-vlada-zorana-milanovica-a-ciju-ratifikaciju-najavljuje-plankovic

7 Ibid., 1.27’ - 1.38’

ways in which stereotypical gender roles represent a pressing obstacle to the achievement of real gender equality and feed into gender discrimination will be addressed***

**Labels that matter: Towards the notion of anti-egalitarian activism**

In the previous section I showed the systematic use of the affirmative pro-family, pro-marriage, pro-children, pro-life, and pro-democracy rhetoric underlying the transnational social mobilisation that aims at challenging the movement towards greater gender and sexual equality. It is possible to speculate that the choice of such rhetoric is motivated by the largely positive appeal that the concept of equality still has in the European context. The discursive effect of this affirmative rhetoric is that the implied negation of rights and equality pertaining to gender and sexuality remained largely hidden in the public discourses.

*** the discussion below will be expanded***

Terms and concepts that have been used so far in the critical reflections on the growing anti-gender mobilisation did not directly expose the opposition to gender and sexual equality present in this movement.

The most used concepts so far:

- Christian right - it’s explanatory power lies in making the connections between similar movements across the globe; it implies the involvement of different Christian denominations and particular Christianity-informed discourses on gender and sexuality

- conservative, neoconservative - one of the most used terms for these groups in the media discourses; can reinforce the meaning of preserving the ‘good old times’ implied by the etymology of the term ‘conservative’; it can move the focus from the issue of equality and gender/sexuality; also this term often evokes the highly contested concept of ‘tradition’ often used to conceal the anti-equality agenda

- anti-gender – predominant label in the critical scholarship; it points out that it is the notion of gender that is at stake; however, one of the shortcoming of this concept may lie in that what it means to be ‘against gender’ may not be so clear and understandable beyond the critical and feminist circles; it could thus be difficult for the wider audience to grasp what is at stake in the context of ‘anti-gender’ mobilisation

While all these labels have their own explanatory value, drawing attention to different aspects of the social organizing against feminist and LGBTIQ politics, none of them directly exposes the concealed negation of gender and sexual equality. This gap could be filled with the concept of anti-egalitarian activism that would serve as a constant reminder of the direct negative impact that this movement has on social equality. Moreover, the value of this concept is further enhanced by its two additional aspects. First, the power of the notion of anti-egalitarian activism also lies in its ability to tap into the social and political capital of the idea of equality that has been historically present in the re/making of the European identity. Second, the concept of anti-egalitarianism could also allow us to see the links between anti-gender mobilisation and other forms of political engagements that have anti-egalitarian implications. By doing so,
this new perspective could have positive effects on strengthening solidarity between women and sexual minorities on the one hand, and other minorities/marginalised groups whose potential equality has been at stake.

Bibliography


