

Populism, polarization and social justice activism

European Journal of Women's Studies

2017, Vol. 24(3) 197–201

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1350506817713439

journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw



In June 2016, Britain's referendum, with a turnout just over 70%, resulted in 52% of votes in favour of the UK exiting the European Union. Sovereignty, national pride and security were among the main issues causing divisions between the 'leave' and 'stay' camps. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) – one of the main supporters of Brexit – is a right-wing, populist party with an anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism (read: anti-Muslim) position, arguing for Britain's withdrawal from European Conventions on Refugees and Human Rights, supporting 'traditional family values' and opposing LGBT rights such as same-sex marriage.

In the Austrian presidential elections, Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the far-right, populist, nationalist, Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, anti-Islam Freedom Party of Austria, won in the first round, then lost in the second round to a Green Party candidate in December 2016. Hofer received 46% of the vote, in a 74% voter turnout. Since 1990, the FPA has never had below 10% votes in national elections, going at one point up to 26%, and in the last 10 years saw a steady increase in support. The party argues for so-called traditional family values, against policies for gender equality.

In the March 2017 parliamentary elections in the Netherlands, the Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid, PvdA) faced massive losses, while the Party for Freedom (De Partij Voor de Vrijheid, PVV) – nationalist, populist, extreme right-wing, anti-European, anti-immigration, anti-Islam, racist, xenophobic – reached second place with over 13% votes, gaining 20 parliamentary seats. PVV has been in operation since early 2000, and within half a decade became one of the most popular parties, oscillating lately between 10 and 20% of votes. Its politicians and policies regularly define Islam as a threat to Dutch achievements in women's and gay emancipation.

In the May 2017 presidential elections in France, Marine Le Pen of National Front lost to the liberal candidate, nevertheless getting 34% votes (11 million people) against his 66%. National Front is an extreme right-wing, nationalist, populist, anti-European, anti-immigrant, anti-Islam party, led, since 2011, by the daughter of the party's former leader, who ran for the presidency in 2002 but lost to Jacques Chirac. The party has had mixed electoral results in the past but has been a steady feature of French politics for decades. Since Marine Le Pen took over the leadership the NF has been steadily gaining votes in regional elections. In the presidential elections the daughter got in 2017 double the votes the father got in 2002. The party stands for so-called traditional family values and against gay marriage and adoption.

In September 2017 Germany will face parliamentary elections. One of the parties striving to gain power is the Alternative for Germany. It was only established in 2013 but has already gained parliamentary seats in more than half the federal states in Germany.

Its anti-immigration and anti-Islam views make it attractive to the newly formed movement that calls itself Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West (PEGIDA) that grew on the waves of the European 'immigration crisis' and Chancellor Merkel's 'open door' policy, as well as the accusations of sexual violence by immigrants against white German women on the eve of the new 2016. The party stands against same-sex marriage and for the so-called traditional family values.

Populist, extreme right-wing parties supporting xenophobic, racist policies are present in parliaments and governments in many countries across Europe. In many of these countries we also hear ever more vociferous rejection of gender equality and LGBT rights, while in the same breath Muslim immigrants are accused of being patriarchal and homophobic. Far-right politicians pursue an aggressive onslaught against gender and sexuality rights activists, accusing them of endangering 'traditional family values', turning school children into gays and lesbians, and at the same time being blind to the dangers of Islamization brought into Europe by women wearing scarves and men attending mosques. A new, pejorative term – 'genderism' – is being used to discredit feminist, women's and LGBT struggles across Europe. And while many of these far-right parties are either Eurosceptic or actively reject a European framework, a number of them are becoming ever more vocal in the European Parliament, forming coalitions in a struggle to influence the European Parliament's policies on gender equality, LGBT issues and immigration.

There is nothing new in the fact that gender and sexuality are implicated in political processes, especially those steeped in racist and nationalist identity politics, and linked to the dramatic proclamations about existential threats faced by nations and states. Black and post-colonial feminist studies have shown us, long ago, that gender and sexuality are part and parcel of the very politics of ruling, that they are the very mode by which political, economic, social and symbolic power is exercised. What may be new, however, are the ways they are combined with anti-immigration and anti-Islam discourses in the Europe of today, contributing to the sharp polarization of the electorate and the consolidation of the extreme right-wing political parties.

Pointing to 'polarization' and 'consolidation' may appear dramatic. After the Dutch and French elections, there was a loud sigh of relief, that the far-right candidates of the PVV and NF ended up with results which did not mirror their boastful appraisal of the popular support. After all, one could say, these two countries were not split in half the way the USA was, in the November 2016 presidential election, when around 55% of eligible voters gave Hillary Clinton 48% and Donald Trump 46% of the popular vote. Donald Trump won anyway with the help of the Electoral College votes. But his campaign's main slogans on the need for anti-Muslim and anti-immigration measures, with 'Make America Great Again' and 'America First', were of quite the same nature as far-right populist slogans across Europe today that decry the loss of sovereignty and national identity, the leftist-liberal onslaught on 'traditional family values' and the threat posed by Muslim immigrants to European Christian and humanist values.

It is safe to say that, historically speaking, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and Orientalism were never absent from European politics, or among the electorate. But for several decades after the Second World War they existed at the fringes of mainstream politics, marginalized, isolated and very often openly discredited. Today – except maybe

for anti-Semitism, which is still publicly considered unacceptable in the mainstream political discourse – extremist right-wing political views have become part of the mainstream, with a new legitimacy: extreme right-wing populist politicians argue they are only voicing out loud what ‘honest, hard-working men and women’ and ‘common people’ think anyway. And if this is racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia and xenophobia, so be it. ‘Honesty’ and ‘straight talk’ is the new name for political speeches in which othering, demonization and dehumanization abound.

What is consolidated is not just an extreme right-wing, populist political agenda, but the very idea that such a political agenda is a legitimate part of the political spectrum, as right, centre and left political parties are opening themselves to such agendas. What is polarized are not only specific political perspectives, but the understanding of the very foundations of social life – of what it means to be a woman and a man, what is family, where and how one belongs in a society. Primordial, essentialized identity politics of which the West has regularly accused the Rest have come home to roost in the European populism: the native, white (West) European women and men are distinguished from everybody else. Not any longer through the culturalized racism of ‘well, we are different so let’s each live our separate lives, albeit next to each other’ but through the direct, nasty racism of ‘get out of my country, you who came here to appropriate my street corner, to steal my job, to assault my daughter’.

The European modernity project which promised progress to the peoples within its borders has been exposed for what it is: a cruel joke. It has failed precisely those ‘honest, hard-working men and women’, those ‘common people’ who have contributed their productive and reproductive bodily labours to build its wealth. Its seductive power was so strong that working and middle classes in Europe seldom thought, let alone believed, that it would befall on them what befell on the masses in the rest of the world: structural adjustment, precarious work, rising unemployment, shrinking benefits, privatization of water supply systems, poverty, homelessness ... And the culprit was not sought among the exploiters but among the immigrants who have been seduced by the same promise: Algerian factory workers imported into the France by the village-loads in the 1920s, and Yugoslav factory workers entering Germany in the 1960s; people whose ‘third generation’ children are now told to ‘go back’ where they came from – although they do come from Marseille and Munich. The culprits are also sought among those who placed their lives at the mercy of roads, waves and wire fences in an attempt to escape the wanton destruction and destitution in their countries brought about by the collusion of local and global corporatisms, extremisms and essentialisms.

Neither polarization nor consolidation of populism is currently only European or only a Western problem. In April 2017 Turkey held a constitutional referendum asking the voters to support a change that would give more power to the president and the leading party for more than a decade to come. Opposition criticized the change as a direct threat to secularism, democracy, independence of the legislative branch of the government, and the checks-and-balances of the executive branch. Though accusations of fraud come from both inside and outside Turkey, the government’s count states that 51.5% of voters approved of the change, apparently accepting arguments that this will make Turkey strong, stable and secure. Public statements of government officials and politicians supported these arguments by linking Islam and Turkish nationhood to ‘traditional family

values' and arguing that they are all threatened by abortion, women's unseemly behaviour in public places, and lack of sexual morals in schools, among others.

After Trump's election hundreds of thousands of people flooded the streets to protest. The biggest protests were organized as women's marches but invigorated many others, such as human rights activists and lawyers who still stand up against Trump's immigration policies. In Turkey, sporadic protests ensued after the referendum, under an unprecedented military crack-down. Already after the failed coup in July 2016 tens of thousands of activists, teachers and university lecturers, journalist and lawyers have been arrested or fired, leaving little doubt what awaits those who oppose the President.

The US and Turkey may appear as totally unrelated examples, and very far from what is going on in Europe. European electoral systems are quite different from the one in the US, and there are thankfully no more military coups on the European continent. So it would seem Europeans have no reason to flood the streets in mass protest. But populisms in all those places share the same features: they create narratives of racialized, gendered and sexualized enemies, spread fears and offer seductive, simplified solutions. They destroy solidarities and empathies, and in doing so they undermine the very foundation of social justice struggles. What used to be the European Left has all but disappeared as a credible force – disintegrated, fractured into small, ineffective parties, co-opted into the homonationalist, Islamophobic and sexist politics. Many – such as Labour Party (PvdA) in the Netherlands – have arrogantly and lazily taken for granted that their worldview is still seen as the right one by a sufficient number of voters. In other parties it is believed that the threat of the extreme-right is still small, and that, when push comes to shove, people will flock around the centre, be it centre-right or centre-left. Recent election results in France and the Netherlands seem to prove this point, as people rushed to cast their vote for the centre parties not because they believed in them, but because they feared victory of far-right candidates. But as the centre moves ever farther to the right, and the far-right moves ever strongly towards the centre, this calculation is misleading and inaction dangerous.

In the absence of broad alliances both within and outside their national borders, numerous women's and feminist activist and grassroots groups across Europe are at the forefront of diverse local, community-based social justice struggles. They fight not just for traditional women-related issues, such as keeping open shelters for abused women, but also for keeping open public kitchens and youth sports facilities, or supporting homeless and poor families. On the shop-floor they fight workers' union battles against layoffs and shrinking labour protection alongside fighting for women's equal pay. As refugee lawyers they battle for asylum seekers and family reunions next to combating sexual exploitation of refugee women. In many of those struggles grassroots feminists compete with the women and men who are far-right activists, or Christian and Muslim fundamentalist, who also work on the community level, door-to-door, among the poor and the marginalized.

Grassroots feminism endures despite the lack of funds and public support, through the stubborn determination of its activists. Their objectives are concrete, direct, affecting the daily lives of people around them – whatever those people wear or believe in. They refuse disillusionment and pessimism on political grounds. Often totally invisible beyond a street corner, their struggles may be among the few left that could still make a

difference between 13% and 46% of votes for extreme far-right populist parties and presidents.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Anissa Helie and Edda Kirleis for comments and suggestions.

Dubravka Zarkov
International Institute of Social Studies/EUR, the Netherlands