

Far Right Mobilisation and Gender

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Preprint / Preprint

Stellungnahme / comment

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pető, A. (2013). *Far Right Mobilisation and Gender*. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-72991-7>

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Far right political activists are not all men, there are also women among them. This very simple statement has not received enough attention from activists and educators who are combating against far right politics. Far right politics also uses its own gender politics as a mobilizing force. This statement is summarizing the state of the art research on far right and gender, giving reasons why educators and teachers should pay attention to this phenomenon, and listing strategies to use, and to avoid, while encountering women who are supporting far right radical actions. The statement also gives suggestions to educators to consider in their work, as well as references and links for further readings.

The state of art of the research

Researchers of the far right movements are usually focusing on men as actors and rarely considering women as actors in the „unholy” civil society. This has been changing in recent research which recognizes women as participants, and also in research on masculinities and femininities constructed by the far rights movements as factors of mobilization. The increasing popularity of far right movements make this research which identifies who are attracted to the far right agenda and who are those who are setting this agenda very timely. Paradigm shift in the research from analyzing institutional structures and political programs to motivations and actions opens up space for a more subtle analysis which moves away from historical analogical argumentation to analysis of discourses and emotions. Surveys show that twice as much men than women are being mobilized to the far right, still women’s presence, motivation and trajectories of joining to this movement have not received enough attention. Recent studies also underline that “far right” is also a very complex category including different forms of participation and support of movements, organizations, and it also means complex matrix of sometimes self-contradicting identifications.

Rationale

In the past decade a new group of women have been mobilized to the far right who are not losers of the economic situation, but well educated women with jobs, who are looking at far right as an anti modernist option to the present emancipation policy and rhetoric. Far right ideas are spreading among young women in the secondary schools and higher education.

The far right is avoiding addressing women as “women”. They are labeled as “mothers” (or as future mothers) and are integrated into a family policy that advocates heterosexual nuclear families. Furthermore, the discourse of the far right relates to family and motherhood, not to individuals. The framework of normative motherhood and the “patriarchal bargain” opens up space for women’s agency without critically questioning values of the ingroup. Therefore the

concept of “family” also regulates dominant masculinity and secures the position of women in marriage, “protecting” them against the extramarital affairs of their husbands. Normative definition of motherhood is a useful strategy, one that secures the financial and moral support of men in a society where women earn on average 20% less than men working in the same positions. This way of thinking permits women to distance themselves from the openly criticized gender politics i.e. of the EU. It also exempts them from the dilemma that defining their identity as women can be potentially described as a “problem identity”. Far right gender politics offers a clear, firm, normative and binary view about how „women” and „men” should work and live together.

The present economic crises questions not only an economic crisis but a structural one which might present far right ideas as a viable alternative in insecure times. In longer term, it concerns a linguistic monopoly of far right over family and motherhood, which falls into a specific conservative interpretation concerning demographic crises. The backdrop of an economic crisis and eroding welfare systems are posing an additional challenge in formulating a counter-argument to far right arguments.

Identification of the target group

Women in far right movements are often portrayed in a simplistic and stereotypical way which prevents not only to understand this phenomenon better, but also to articulate educational strategies. The stereotypical woman in the far right movement is either a young, inexperienced, misled teenager with difficult family background or a partner of a male member. The understanding of complexities of mobilization contributes to a better understanding.

- Far right ideas are finding their place among very different men and women as far as institutional membership (political party/civil organisation), regionality (local/urban), education (higher/middle), use of internet (active/consumer only), position in the community (respected professional: doctor, lawyer, etc. or marginal), age.
- In the case of women, far right ideas form an opposition to the mainstream emancipation narrative and emphasize spiritualism and essentially „feminine” characteristics.
- Conservative and far right groups might find common ground in working together in issues like combating trafficking and prostitution, issues traditionally defined by progressive political forces. In spite of these common agendas, the differences regarding strategies and trajectories should be emphasized.
- The different forms and organizations of far right mobilization might mean different reasons for women to join. Developing far right sentiments and action needs space, so identifying and understanding what these spaces mean for women, is an important step.

The present wave of far right movements requires new strategies and reviewing the old ones. The old reflexes such as using authoritarian arguments or ask for legalist based intervention can offer only short term solutions. Educators need to be conscious about what kind of strategies to use and what to avoid when encountering far right extremism. The next session lists strategies to use and strategies not to use.

Strategies not to use

- Far right movements are constructing a meta-culture with special symbols, narratives and heroes to celebrate, dress code to show off. Mocking and labeling these ideas will lead deepening the divide as the reference group is usually more attractive. Do not demonize!
- Far right mobilization can take complex and different organizational forms therefore essentializing them would push the participants for further radicalization.
- Do not put different groups, individuals under one umbrella-term such as far right, but try to spot differences. Collapsing complexities for the sake of the understanding is firing back.
- Women attracted by far right are understanding their choice to support this group as a form of agency, questioning if the choice was right will be easily rejected therefore another model should be presented which is an alternative to their present lifestyle. Do not use complicated and heavily loaded language when communicating about simple issues
- Far right mobilization is based on anti-establishment attitudes: speaking from the position of the establishment can be very counterproductive as any pedagogical situation which can be interpreted as victimization.
- Confrontation should be based on moral arguments, do not use legal terminology. Do not use authoritarian argument as claiming more state intervention into affairs.
- The organizational of far right movements are subverting what we have known about social movements. Heritage organizations, mothers' clubs, students' clubs can be sites for far right mobilization. Declaring tolerance in itself will not prevent those recruiting women, active counter action is required.

Strategies to use

- Joining far right is a form of protest and a resistance to a form of modernity. Understanding some parts of that criticism: „treadmill” of consumption, environmental catastrophes, exploitation of women might help to move towards a more nuanced analysis.
- Create small projects where you can involve people with different views: researching life stories of forgotten women who contributed to the local history can be very attractive. Rediscovering life stories of forgotten women can be also used in a parallel life story project when members of the class are comparing turning points of their lives and values they are following in their lives to women of the past.
- Read the literature women of far right are referring to, try to read their “mind”, familiarize with concepts they are using.
- The line for tolerance should be clearly visible during communication: what is acceptable and what is not (for example harming people).

- The young generation is “digital native”, use internet to spread your ideas.
- Try to follow the media (including social media) coverage regarding issues important for young women and bring in examples in the class/meetings to discuss
- Direct action promoting an agenda is always more effective than indirect media campaign
- Concrete information and facts on issues influencing their lives: such as pension system are more effective than general lecture on democratic values

Suggestions for educators

In different educational situations different strategies can be used, and the simplest encounter can be defined as an educational situation. Gender should be integrated not only when speaking about women but also when essentializing and homogenizing concepts are being used about other social groups such as migrants or homosexuals.

- Europe is facing the “lost decade” and the “lost generation”, therefore critical thinking is crucial as a skill learned in education. Introduction of critical thinking is not automatic, but essential.
- Change can only happen from within therefore strategies for fighting far right extremism should focus on enhancing change in the individual
- Debate itself is a product: you have to carefully prepare it and make sure the moderation of the debate is effective
- Never consider teaching as finished: this is a continuous process of paying attention to each other
- Prevention is better than intervention: if you see changes in dress code, tattoos, or readings you might want to discuss the reasons. Positioning yourself as a learner who wants to know more is more productive than stepping in as an authority.
- Map and use possible support structures, women NGOs etc. in your neighborhood, as for advice from crisis centers
- Identity is considered as a capital which makes life easier to live, abrupt change might lead to crisis and sometimes personal tragedy so be careful.
- More and more young women are growing up in families with far right ideas. One cannot expect these women to simply turn against their socialization and fight against their families. However, asking them to write their own life stories and compare them with other life stories written in class might lead to reflective and meaningful discussions.

Conclusions

Far right beliefs are products and constitutive parts of the European modernization, they represent the dark legacy of the European project. The task for today is to develop a new narrative of Europe, where teaching has a crucial role to play. In this new narrative, gender should promote equality and freedom for all as gender is also a constitutive part of far right mobilization. Women, young and old who are supporting far right politics are doing so because they choose so. This decision should be understood and may be changed. Not by portraying these women as victims, and not with demanding state intervention and repression, but with constructing viable and livable alternatives.

Further readings

Bacchetta, P. & Margaret Power, M. (eds.), (2002) *Right-Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World*, New York: Routledge.

Pető, A. (2010) "Anti-Modernist Political Thoughts on Motherhood in Europe in a Historical Perspective" in *Reframing Demographic Change in Europe. Perspectives on Gender and Welfare State Transformations*. Heike Kahlert, Waltraud Ernst (Eds.) *Focus Gender*. Band 11. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 189-201.

<http://www.frauen-und-rechtsextremismus.de/cms/>

<http://genderandfarright.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/eng/we-are-active/topics/gender-and-the-prevention-of-right-wing-extremism/>

Resume

Andrea PETŐ is an Associate Professor at the Department of Gender Studies. She edited thirteen volumes in English, six volumes in Hungarian, two in Russian. Her works appeared in different languages, including Bulgarian, Croatian, English, French, Georgian, German, Hungarian, Italian, Russian and Serbian. She has also been a guest professor at the universities of Toronto, Buenos Aires, Stockholm and Frankfurt. Her books include: *Women in Hungarian Politics 1945-1951* (Columbia University Press/East European Monographs New York, 2003), *Geschlecht, Politik und Stalinismus in Ungarn. Eine Biographie von Júlia Rajk*. Studien zur Geschichte Ungarns, Bd. 12. (Gabriele Schäfer Verlag, 2007) and together with Ildikó Barna, *Political Justice in Budapest after WWII* (forthcoming by CEU Press). Presently she is working on gendered memory of WWII and political extremisms. She was awarded by President of the Hungarian Republic with the Officer's Cross Order of Merit of The Republic of Hungary in 2005 and Bolyai Prize by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 2006.

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