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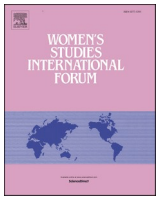

Review

Anti-gender politics and European democracies' legacies of exclusion and violence☆

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the problems that current anti-gender actors pose for democracy in Europe demands investigating the broader legacies that underpin liberal democracies and shape political, economic and social inequalities and exclusions. Capitalist, colonial, and fascist legacies, in different ways, are built into current democratic systems and thus, prepare the ground for political projects of anti-gender actors. Such legacies deny the equal status of women, non-cis identities, non-heterosexual people, Black people, people of colour, non-Christians, migrants and displaced people, as do the political projects of anti-gender actors. Anti-gender actors can thus tap into such inequalities of liberal democracy to spread their exclusionary projects. Recognizing anti-gender politics as rooted in the fundamental flaws of liberal democracy provides a broader framework for forging new connections between feminist theory and democratic thought.

Introduction

Anti-gender mobilization has become a pervasive feature of politics in European democracies and beyond. Whilst studies on anti-gender actors and their political projects increasingly address the threat they pose to democracy (cf. Choi et al., 2024; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Grzebalska, 2016; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Norocel & Paternotte, 2023; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018; Zaremberg et al., 2021), the ways in which fundamental flaws in liberal democracies are enabling such projects remain underexplored. Moreover, anti-gender politics—often defined as "an ultraconservative opposition to the developments of progressive movements around gender, reproduction and sexuality" (Korolczuk et al., 2025)—are frequently framed as a novel phenomenon: "a new movement emerging in Europe" (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, 2), "a new form of conservative mobilization" (Norocel & Paternotte, 2023, 123), or "a new phase of culture wars" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, 2). This characterization of anti-gender politics as new, reactionary or ultraconservative obscures the long and normalized histories of exclusion and violence that are neither recent nor exclusively reactionary, and -by foregrounding gender and sexuality as primary focus- fails to center race as a constitutive dimension of these dynamics (Rowley, 2020; Townsend-Bell, 2020).

In this article, we contribute to existing theories on anti-gender politics by pointing to the inherent flaws of liberal democracies as a root cause for the emergence of such anti-democratic projects. We argue that the problematic legacies underpinning European liberal democracies –such as capitalism, colonialism, and fascism– create enabling conditions for anti-gender mobilization, and how anti-gender actors engage with and rework these legacies, effectively rendering them timeless. The remnants of historical legacies create fertile ground for anti-gender actors and their political projects to emerge easily and spread rapidly. Specifically, we contend that to comprehend anti-gender politics, the legacy of systems of domination and oppression that still shape European liberal democracies is a productive analytical seam to mine.

Indeed, as feminist and critical democracy scholars have

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demonstrated, liberal democracies were an exclusionary project from the outset. They were created by and for white men, based on upper-class, heterosexual and cisgender, male citizenship, reflecting a patriarchal model fortified by a sharp distinction between the public and private spheres (Butler & Scott, 1992; Pateman, 1970). European projects of peaceful, democratic governance and the protection of individual, white, male freedom and property rights coincide with the brutal colonial exploitation and violence exercised overseas. Whilst the threat from exclusionary political projects of far-right parties was a moment of revelation to the majority of democracy scholars and/or white feminists, for many who had faced, named and mobilised against prolonged intersecting oppressions, the experience was not new (Townsend-Bell, 2020). Whether long established or recent, European liberal democracies – deliberately – ignored, gendered, racialized, class and other power hierarchies, and institutionalized misogyny, racism, and other forms of discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion.

To understand the problems that current anti-gender actors pose for democracy in Europe, we examine how these actors use and reproduce legacies of domination and oppression that mark(ed) them. Following Morlino (2024, 125), a legacy is "…the presence of features of a resilient past that is not fading away in the people's collective memory and has often been transformed into institutions with vested interests." We contend that European liberal democracies are shaped by the legacies intrinsic to capitalism, colonialism, and fascism; past features that have left deep imprints of political exclusion, inequality, and violence. We unpack how these embedded legacies facilitate anti-gender mobilization. While existing scholarship has addressed capitalism, colonialism, and fascism in relation to anti-gender politics, our contribution underlines how the aforementioned legacies are constitutive elements of liberal democracy and thus how liberal democracy in itself enables anti-gender mobilization. In developing a clearer understanding of the relationship between anti-gender mobilization and liberal democracy, our contribution highlights how the legacies of inequality that are embedded in liberal democracy prepare the ground for the contemporary phenomenon of anti-gender politics. To that end, we discuss each legacy, including how the scholarship on anti-gender mobilizations has addressed it, and consider what insights would be gained by understanding that anti-gender actors actually draw on systems of domination and oppression that mark liberal democracy in itself. Understanding anti-gender politics as rooted in the structural flaws of liberal democracy offers a broader perspective that has potential to connect, and advance, both feminist and democracy theories.

While we maintain the term 'anti-gender' in our analysis, due to the centrality of the concept 'anti-gender' in current research and debates about far right politics and democratic backsliding, we propose to use this term with caution and reflexivity. The concept of anti-gender is problematic for two main reasons. First, the prefix "anti" frames this movement as merely reactive—a backlash against feminist and LGBTQI+ agendas—rather than highlighting its proactive, ideological ambitions. In reality, it promotes a comprehensive sociopolitical project rooted in the defense of a so-called "natural order": a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and Western-centric worldview. This vision is paired with a conception of democracy that is majoritarian and anti-pluralist, one that actively contests the rights of gendered, sexual, and racialized minorities. Such groups are often denied recognition or violently excluded from the definitions of "the people" and "the demos." Second, the emphasis on *gender* as the core bone of contention obstructs a fully intersectional perspective, prompting the question of whether the label is adequate to address the complexities of the issues at hand (Holvikivi et al., 2024). Indeed, as Cattien (2023, 829) argues, "the 'gender' in 'antigenderism' cannot be delinked from its interaction with historical regimes of racialization and the ongoing reverberations of European colonialism", because the neglect of "the historical facticity of colonialisms, racisms, enslavement and their afterlives (Hawthorne, 2019, 58)" would "reenact white feminist erasures of the centrality of race and racism to political struggle". Therefore, we claim that the category of "anti-gender" should be operationalized with caution. However, as the term itself is already commonly used across different disciplines, it seems that we cannot expect its complete abandonment or swift modification. A re-conceptualization of the term "anti-gender" exceeds the ambitions of this article, which instead seeks to lay the critical groundwork and present the arguments necessary for undertaking such a task.

Our contribution focuses on the European Union (EU) context, acknowledging that not all member states can simply be labelled as liberal democracy and that within the EU the legacies of domination and oppression, in relation to capitalism, colonialism, or fascism, differ considerably between Eastern and Western Europe (see Kalmar, 2022). While this needs to be considered in empirical research, it does not obstruct the construction of our argument on the relation between the exclusionary legacies of democracy and how liberal democracy itself in Europe paves the way for anti-gender politics. This article develops its argument by drawing on a critical review of theories of anti-gender politics and the crisis of democracy in the EU, employing a variety of multidisciplinary approaches to articulate linkages between these contemporary phenomena and the European capitalist, colonial and fascist past. Conducting such critical review was necessary to understand the phenomenon from a novel perspective – distinct from those in existing anti-gender literature – that links anti-genderism to democracy. The next section presents the methodology, followed by sections that respectively discuss capitalist, colonial, and fascism legacies, before concluding.

Methodology

Our main contribution is to highlight the importance of examining contemporary anti-gender politics within the pre-existing, contextualized local configurations of the exclusionary legacies within European liberal democracies. This theoretical and methodological proposal stems from systematic conceptual work which we undertook as an interdisciplinary team of feminist and queer scholars from political science, sociology, cultural studies and philosophy (Roggeband et al., 2023). The main criterion employed in this critical literature review was to select and analyse scholarship that would deepen the understanding of the current challenges facing democracy in the EU, including anti-gender politics.

Methodologically, we began with a systematic analysis of the key explanations about the structural roots of Europe's democratic crisis and the rise of anti-gender politics offered by our different academic disciplines. We then placed these dominant narratives in critical dialogue with voices positioned on their margins: coming from feminist intersectional authors, who also engage in examining democracy and anti-genderism. We intentionally sought out subjugated knowledges —critical voices often dismissed as overly particular, biased, or insufficiently "scientific." This included scholarship and testimonies from those most affected by the exclusionary dynamics perpetuated by both EU liberal democracies and anti-gender movements: racialized, queer, and feminist activists and communities who stand on the front lines of pro-democratic resistance. Knowledge was built incrementally through this collaborative process, shaped by both the cited and uncited authors in our broader literature review (Roggeband et al., 2023). This journey led us to explore the analytical category of "legacies", understood as historically embedded, often covert "haunting" forces that continue to shape contemporary political crises, including anti-gender mobilizations.

Research material included over two hundred fifty documents: books, journal articles and pamphlets written by authors representing various academic disciplines such as: feminist political theory and philosophy, Black feminism, critical race studies, queer studies, migration studies, critical border studies, East European studies, critical anthropology, global studies, contemporary historiography, political science, and sociology. A qualitative purposeful sampling (Luborsky &

Rubinstein, 1995) that could offer insights for understanding the phenomenon of anti-gender politics and the crisis of democracy in the EU from feminist and intersectional lenses, informed our selection of readings. Through it, we aimed at overcoming limitations existing in narrowly defined echo-chambers of our disciplines, which tend to use distinct sets of theoretical references to investigate the same social phenomena. The sample of journals we used in our review consisted of fifty six titles, encompassing a diverse array of disciplines within the social sciences and humanities, such as: political science & international relations, sociology, gender studies & feminist theory, cultural studies and philosophy, law, communication & media studies. Over two-thirds of all journals (38 titles) fall into the top two quartiles of the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR). More than half of the selected journals have an international scope, addressing transnational and comparative issues. Approximately 30 % focus specifically on European contexts—including Central and Eastern Europe—while just over 10 % examine North American politics and societies. It should be recognized that we engaged mostly with Western scholarship, positioned on the intersection of political science, sociology and gender studies.

We followed a process of individual and collective reading and debating of readings, presenting and discussing material in twenty bi-monthly meetings that allowed us to add conceptual pieces to the puzzle of understanding the anti-gender phenomenon in the broader context of the crisis of democracy in the EU. We proceeded through an inductive and reflexive "snowball" reading process that allowed us, at the end of each debate, to select the most adequate readings to continue the collective thinking on anti-genderism and democracy.

Our main contribution to the field is to recalibrate the focus of the anti-gender vs. democracy debate. We argue that anti-gender politics should not be interpreted as the sole or principal driver of de-democratization, nor as a self-contained phenomenon. Instead, this article argues for the need to develop a dimension in the literature on anti-gender politics that links current threats to liberal democracies with the historical legacies of colonialism, capitalism, and fascism. This approach brings forward innovative theoretical perspectives by rearranging an "assemblage" of various, yet dispersed across academia, critical voices and studies under a new, overarching frame. While there are studies that address anti-gender mobilizations and democratic decay across Europe in relation to the past and particular national contexts (Norocel et al., 2020; Zaharijević et al., 2023), and they lucidly show, how "nostalgia" and the myth of "old good times" or "glorious past" contribute to the growing popularity of right-wing parties, this research does not explicitly connect current threats to liberal democracies to their formative and intertwined legacies of colonialism, capitalism and fascism, which is what our article innovatively does. In our article, we propose a broader approach to studying anti-gender politics. In the following sections, we highlight the important research which has already expanded our thinking about anti-gender politics and pointed out the existing connections between the latter and the embedded exclusions of the European liberal democracy project.

Capitalist legacies and neoliberal present

Capitalism has shaped European economies and democracies whose wealth was often built on colonial terror (see next section). Racist and sexist violence is integral to capitalism. It thrives on the extraction of cheap labour and the reproduction of colonial and racist structures (Ferguson & Hong, 2012; Vergès, 2022). In this respect, Black and global South feminists have long argued, capitalism and neoliberalism are inherently neocolonial projects (Gago, 2020; Lugones, 2007; Mendoza, 2018). Capitalism also perpetuates the public/private divide by separating economic production from social reproduction, with the latter disproportionately shouldered by women and workers from racialized and migrant communities (Duggan, 2002; Federici, 2004; Fraser, 2013, 2017). The collapse of the Soviet Union left neoliberal capitalism the dominant ideology in Europe. Arguably, its most voracious market-driven incarnation, this has led to a marked increase in precarious working and living conditions, gendering and racialization of labour (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017), and reinforced social inequalities (El-Tayeb, 2011). By reducing public services and dismantling welfare systems, neoliberal policies have left women—especially migrant, racialised, and domestic workers—to fill the resulting gaps.

Simultaneously, the increasing normalized dominance of economic interests over the political sphere has eroded democracy, shifting power to non-elected entities like global corporations and financial institutions. This failure of democracies to curb the power of financial capitalism has led to decision-making that further prioritizes the private interests of the few over the collective (Brown, 2015, 2019; Honig, 2017). Businesses not only evade democratic accountability but also increasingly shape governance (Fraser, 2013; Repo, 2016; Walby, 2015). This shifts the conception of citizenship from active political engagement to passive consumerism or entrepreneurialism, transforming governance from democratic deliberation to market-driven, technocratic management (Brown, 2015; Ong, 2006).

The rise of anti-gender actors and far-right politics has been connected to the expansion of neoliberal politics (e.g., Brown, 2019; Butler, 2024; Fassin, 2020; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Meret & Scrinzi, 2024; Pető, 2015). European (and US-based) scholarship often views anti-gender campaigns as opportunistic tools that exploit and mobilize broader anxieties surrounding the harmful effects of neoliberalism (e.g., Fassin, 2020; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Grzebalska, 2016; Pető, 2015). Authors highlight the complex interplay between anti-gender discourses, neoliberalism, and racism, linking anti-gender politics and far-right populism to the restructuring of welfare state systems. They connect anti-gender movements to the 'neoliberal crisis of reproduction' and to their xenophobic and racist dimensions (Erel, 2018). Indeed, anti-gender actors present the white family as crumbling and in need of support to maintain the white nation (Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al., 2018; Meret & Scrinzi, 2024), whilst migrant and refugee families are portrayed as contributing to overpopulation and unchecked procreation, and disrupting "European" values (Erel, 2018).

Anti-gender actors and far-right populism tend to present their agenda as a response to neoliberalism, vilifying feminism and LGBTQI+ organizations as part of a global neoliberal power elite (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). This narrative is especially effective when paired with chauvinist welfare policies (Careja & Harris, 2022; Hägerbäck & Norocel, 2024; Nijs et al., 2023; Sager & Mulinari, 2017). For instance, populist radical right parties often introduce generous welfare policies for normative white families (Fodor, 2021; Szikra, 2014), improving the economic situation of (some) women. Dietze (2020) argues that the European far-right appeals to working and middle-class women who may find a sense of inclusion in their ideas about family, care, and whiteness due to their dissatisfaction with neoliberalism.

The anti-gender critique of neoliberal capitalism actually intersects with feminist debates about the distinction between production and reproduction. However, it does not address structural inequalities and ultimately leaves neoliberal capitalism unchallenged and reified (Gunnarsson Payne & Tornhill, 2023). Anti-gender critiques call for the recalibration of capitalism in line with "traditional values," where the family (not the individual) is seen as the locus of freedom and rights. This perspective does not critique capitalist modes of production; rather, it demands either that white European women do not join the workforce, or "encourage" to work full time while also bearing the load of care work, as a means to curb migration – arguably the more immediate malady (Fodor, 2021). Anti-gender actors do not challenge the public/private divide, rather they seek to expand the private sphere, insulating it from democratic scrutiny (Brown, 2015, 2019). Economic inequalities within the private realm, exacerbated by neoliberalism, are framed as "natural." While feminists call for an alternative ethic of care, anti-gender and far-right actors explicitly regard the crisis of care as the burden of women, and increasingly migrants who lack proper labour protection or social status, let alone full citizenship (Gunnarsson Payne

& Tornhill, 2023). del Campo (2023) cautions that the far right's opposition to neoliberal policies may obscure its compatibility with their anti-gender agenda. Their advocacy for rigid, 'naturalized' gender roles, such as the ideal of the "tradwife" and hyper-masculine men (del Campo, 2023, 689), neatly dovetails with the neoliberal project. These gendered subjects are "authoritarian neoliberal subjects" (del Campo, 2023) integral to maintaining a strong state. By reinforcing these roles, the far right ensures that the reproduction of labour and capital aligns with the social structures needed to sustain economic growth and social order.

Framing anti-gender actors and discourses as "a reactionary critique of the neoliberal socio-cultural formation" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, 153) risks legitimizing their (limited) critique of neoliberalism -usually through critique of globalization- and diverts attention from how neoliberalism is actually central to their proactive exclusionary agendas. These movements are not seeking to dismantle neoliberalism; neoliberalism neatly fits with their political project. Greater attention must be given to anti-gender actors as reproducers of neoliberalism, exacerbating the precarious economic and political positions of targeted groups, particularly queer individuals, migrants, and racialized communities. Characterizing anti-gender mobilization as a reactionary movement also risks reducing it to a right-wing, conservative phenomenon, while overlooking the presence of anti-trans and racist sentiment within feminist and left-wing circles. Ojeda et al. (2024) provide a nuanced perspective on global anti-gender movements, revealing how anti-gender ideologies, neoliberalism, racism, and neo-fascism, are intricately interwoven.

Colonial legacies

To understand anti-gender politics and their relation to liberal democracy, it is essential to understand the intimate intersections between gender, sexuality and race within the context of the European colonial legacy, the racial politics of European states and the European Union, and the material realities faced by citizens of colour and migrants from the Global South struggling on the EU borders.

The legacy of colonialism plays out differently across contemporary European states. Eastern Europe, for example, has a complicated history of being both a colony and a colonizer, albeit with no African colonies of its own (Huigen & Kołodziejczyk, 2023), whilst Western Europe has a lengthy and violent colonial history in Africa and the global South. Despite these differences, European imperialism and colonialism continue to have a profound impact on European self-articulation and politics. The evolution of modern European nation-states was preceded by colonization, to which "the racisms of self-proclaimed European superiority" were integral (Goldberg, 2006, 331). Although racism in Europe has various social manifestations and targets different groups, including Black people, Roma people, Muslims, or Jews, depending on regional and national contexts, it is rooted in the foundational idea of Europe as a white, superior, and Christian space. The present EU border regimes and migration and asylum policies, for instance, quintessentially illustrate the requirement to protect this white Christendom in Europe.

European colonialism forged a deep connection between European democracies and racist terror, linking modern ideas of legal personhood for citizens to the exclusion of enslaved people from any legal recognition (Mbembe, 2019; Perry, 2018). The colonial metropole and the regimes of colonies co-existed, and brutal violence against Black, Indigenous and racialized people functioned to safeguard the "civilized" world of the metropole. In contemporary terms, Europe's colonial past "brings (…) the languages of immigration and racism together" (Tudor & Ticktin, 2021, 1650). EU migration politics, while transmitting racial assumptions on European nationhood, produce violent border regimes against people on the move, and perpetuate the marginalisation of Europeans of colour, positioning them as second-class citizens. European politicians uphold a colonial distinction between those who deserve full humanity (Emejulu, 2022), and have "the right to flee from war and danger" (Rokita, 2024), and those who should and should not "exist, and be recognized and understood" (Tudor & Ticktin, 2021, 1649).

While anti-gender scholarship highlights far-right politics in Europe, it tends to limit its analytical focus to various expressions of "politicized homophobia and misogyny" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, 2), tacitly privileging white citizens. This neglects racism and Islamophobia, which are closely intertwined with gender-based exclusion, cogently illustrated by media and other representations of the 2015 Cologne events (Boulila & Carri, 2017; von Redecker, 2016), the Law and Justice discourse in Polish elections (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Madsen Evang, 2022), Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's "reproductive racism" (Indelicato & Magalhães Lopes, 2024), or Marine Le Pen's racialized sexism (Scrinzi, 2023). In most cases scholars trace the origins of combined misogyny and racism to the past, whether this is French colonialism (Scrinzi, 2023), 19th century anti-Semitic discourse, interwar European nationalism (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), or German Nazism (von Redecker, 2016).

Indeed, feminists of colour have consistently and thoroughly explained how racial lines segregate feminist struggles, knowledge and policies (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1984; Olufemi, 2020; Zakaria, 2022). In the European context, Wekker (2016) critically analyzed how the Dutch government and academia perpetuate colonial patterns through the "dissociation of gender and race/ethnicity" and the "evacuation of whiteness from race" (63–68). The division between gender equality policies (addressing white women) and policies on social integration, minority affairs, or international development (addressing Surinamese, Antillean, Turkish, Moroccan, and "Third World" women and men), mirrors colonial logics. These logics create and reinforce distinct categories with gender equality policies, even when labelled as "intersectional", assuming whiteness and defining gender through a straight, cis, non-disabled, middle-class lens. Solanke (2021) has highlighted analogous issues in relation to EU anti-discrimination law. Similarly, Fejzula (2023) underscores the centrality of race in understanding the intersectional experiences of Romani women. She warns against whitening such instances of racism by side-lining the destructive impact of anti-Roma racism, the legacy of which resides in the image of European "civilization" that constructed Roma as non-European and non-human, and involved histories of Roma enslavement (Furtună et al., 2024).

Such analyses provide essential toolkits for considering how anti-gender scholarship may ignore, and thereby reproduce exclusionary power dynamics. The absence of an intersectional approach is particularly striking, with much scholarship on anti-gender mobilizations emphasising the latter's connections with radical right populism that prioritizes the protection of a European white majority against immigrants. The protection of women's and LGBTQI+ rights is shoehorned into concepts such as "Christianophobia" (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018, 10) or contradictorily as a white "civilizational achievement" against Muslim citizens or racialized migrants. However, anti-gender actors reframe local gender equality discourses to produce exclusionary visions of their nations, which are rooted in the intersection of gender, race, and religion (Roggeband et al., 2023). Madsen Evang (2022) discusses the rhetoric of xenophobic, racist, and anti-gender actors in Poland, and radical right homonationalist groups in Norway, which are against "non-Western migration", and identifies their common commitment to "racist meta-framing of immigration as a threat to the nation" (114). Despite differences in their positions on the "right wing continuum" (Norocel, 2024), both cases can be categorized under the "anti-gender" label because their idealised notions of defending European nations are distinctly gendered.

Graff and Korolczuk (2017) and Korolczuk and Graff (2018) demonstrate how anti-gender actors in Europe employ an anticolonial framework that presents them, and by extension the nation, as victims of international powers. In this narrative, "gender ideology" is presented as an alien construct, imposed on local cultures and values by international institutions and global elites, contrary to the will of the people. The

comparison of "gender ideology" to a deadly contagion, such as the Ebola virus, is a deliberately racist analogy and not accidental. Korolczuk and Graff (2018) acknowledge this, but argue that the core target is the liberal value system and neoliberal global capitalism (798). We contend that racism is an integral part of anti-gender mobilization in Europe, and it is directed at racialized minorities and migrants, fuelling fear of, and resentment toward, Black and brown bodies (Choi et al., 2024). Indeed, anti-gender actors claim that "gender ideology" is responsible for the arrival of people of colour in Europe (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, 100). Anti-gender actors defend idealised notions of Europe that are explicitly white. Concomitantly, intersectional feminist and queer politics are targeted because they impede and challenge "the reproduction of the nation as white and heterosexual" (Holzberg, 2024, 199). The convergence between misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and racism is not only symbolic or instrumental, but material and tangible.

Comprehending anti-gender politics requires not only recognizing the intimate intersections between gender, sexuality and race within their political project. It also requires a recognition of the exclusion, violence, and dehumanization experienced by migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, whether on European borders, within detention zones, or through everyday encounters across the continent, or how security and welfare are intertwined with the suspension of 'universal' human rights and democratic freedoms for racialized "Others", including EU citizens. Against this backdrop, anti-gender politics can be interpreted as attempts to restore racialized, (neo)colonial capitalist hierarchies of mobility and division of labour through democratic measures and the normalization of racist and xenophobic discourse, which perpetuates what Manuela Boatcă called "a sanitized version of European history" and "a white Western European identity as a norm" (Boatcă, 2020, 389) within the political mainstream.

Fascist legacies

Connecting anti-gender politics, discourses and ideologies to the legacies of European fascism reveals how deeply the former draw from and reactivate historical narratives of authoritarianism, patriarchal order, and ethnonationalist purity that have long shaped the continent's political culture. While not all European states have similar fascist histories, the legacies of European fascism still persist across Europe, evidenced by the widespread far-right politics. Connecting the political project of anti-gender actors to the legacies of European fascism reveals that these legacies are constitutive elements of liberal democracies in Europe, that prepare fertile ground for current anti-gender mobilisations.

While today's European far right differs from classical fascism, particularly in its critique of neoliberalism and its emphasis on Islamophobic rather than antisemitic rhetoric (Traverso, 2019), certain features of cultural fascism remain (Eco, 1997). Fascism can be understood as a collage of various—sometimes contradictory—philosophical and political ideas (Eco, 1997), including nationalism, authoritarianism, and a drive to control and reshape politics and society (Linz et al., 2008). In this sense, fascism is not a 'monolithic ideology' (Eco, 1997) but rather a state of mind, a culture, 'a way of thinking and feeling' (Eco, 1997, 14) based on the domination of those perceived as 'others,' distinct from the white European male (Dolphijn & Braidotti, 2022). What Eco (1997) calls eternal fascism, resonates in anti-gender rhetoric and the recent rise of far-right politics, in the features of traditionalism, anti-intellectualism, irrationalism, racism, hyper-nationalism, anti-communism, the appeal to frustrated middle classes, conspiracy and xenophobia, anti-parliamentarism, cult of war, sexism and popular elitism (Eco, 1997). Anti-gender actors today opportunistically use different cultural features in support of their anti-democratic project (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

The literature on gender and far-right parties has exposed the centrality of gender to their ideology, as well as the genderedness of far-right political leaders and voters in Europe (Spierings et al., 2015). Analyses of why men and women join (populist) radical right parties, and how the latter mobilize their members in gender-specific ways, have shown how they exploit the discursive opportunities in each national context that are rooted in gender, race, class and religious legacies (Scrinzi, 2023). Despite its heterogeneity, far-right discourses in Europe show commonalities through their nationalistic, racist, antifeminist, anti-LGBTQI+, conservative, and antidemocratic attitudes. Some studies address the strong anti-gender sentiment of radical right populism or the far right more generally, showing that gender constitutes a meta-language. Anti-gender movements are argued to create spaces for white cisgender men and women to voice their anger, feel included, and obtain a sense of empowerment that current European liberal democracies do not deliver (Scrinzi, 2023). Other studies are attentive to the ways anti-gender actors seek cultural hegemony in support of an essentialist, binary, biological 'natural order' of gender and sexuality (Dietze & Roth, 2020) to achieve an authoritarian societal project (Paternotte & Verloo, 2021).

Whilst this literature reveals certain elements of anti-gender politics, it is less attentive to fascist legacies. However, showing how anti-gender narratives are imbricated with the legacies of European fascism offers interesting insights. Studies by feminist historians show that gender played a crucial role in the development of fascism, acting as a dispositive for both social control and organisation. The gender structuring of nativist fascist states (re)produced a sociosexual order based on sharply defined gender binary roles, a gendered division of labour, and the subsequent separation between the private and public spheres. While men were imagined as protectors, heroes and sole participants in the public sphere, women were constructed as moral guardians of the nation, responsible for the private sphere, reproducers and educators of future generations (Blasco Herranz, 2014; Caviglia, 2004). Fascist ideas about gender resonate in current anti-gender discourses. First, anti-gender actors diffuse ideas and sentiments that evoke a mythical past in which conservative notions of the family, accompanying gender roles, and the supremacy of white nationhood, are common sense (Butler, 2024; Stanley, 2020) and are designed to advance an authoritarian vision of society. Secondly, they promote an understanding of the people in which gendered, sexual and racial minorities do not belong. This occurs because anti-gender actors reverse the dynamics of majorities and minorities, portraying minorities as a "totalitarian" threat to white, cisgender, heterosexual men and women, who are framed as the rightful leaders of the state. An example of this is the frequent reference to feminists as nazis (feminazis). Both the understanding of the family and that of the people in anti-gender political projects reflect and repurpose key ideological elements around sociosexual and nativist order and authoritarianism in European fascist traditions.

The legacies of European fascism also include a politics of violence. The relationship between fascism and violence is intricately linked. It is evident in the construction of a masculinity associated with fascist fetishisation of war, which has explicit consequences for gender. Fascist regimes have relied on violence to subjugate women, queer people, racialised minorities, political opponents and 'other' groups considered dispensable to the nation (Filigrana, 2020; Martínez, 2017; Muñoz Encinar, 2021). Contemporary anti-gender movements employ similar strategies to incite hatred and violence against feminists, queer, and racialised people (Butler, 2024). In this context, feminist trans-exclusionary politics become valuable allies to anti-gender projects that draw on fascist tropes to proliferate moral panics against transgender people, particularly transgender women, as a threat to a supposed real womanhood (Bassi & LaFleur, 2022). Underlying this violence is the political DNA redolent of the legacies of European fascism which excluded or exterminated minorities from the public sphere and enforced a white, patriarchal, gender-binary, heteronormative system.

Beyond physical violence, fascist regimes also deployed power and control through their naturalisation and internalisation by the population, to ensure their acceptance. Bratich (2022) argues that this logic

underscores contemporary articulations of micro-fascism through cultural practices and social investment in masculine forms of sovereignty (see also Fielitz & Marcks, 2019). This is articulated through misogyny and patriarchal pacts between men that enact war on women and other gender non-conforming people (see also Bazzano, 2022). Male supremacism has been identified as one of the driving ideological pillars bridging fascism and digital masculinist subcultures (Price, 2023). In this sense, Bratich (2022, 63) asserts that the "*manosphere*" is a digitally enhanced microfascism. More generally, micro-fascist cultural politics can be articulated through the production of self/other power dynamics, evident in the reinforcement of strong nationalist and patriarchal values, and the incitement of racism, misogyny, and xenophobia (see also Dolphijn & Braidotti, 2022), all of which can be found in anti-gender discourses and political projects.

Understanding the persistence of the legacies of European fascism in liberal democracy and how this connects to anti-gender politics is essential. It exposes how much the anti-gender actors can mobilize the repertoire of ideas and passions that come from the authoritarian past and continue to resonate in liberal democracy to legitimise and spread their anti-democratic project, pointing at the need to fundamentally rethink liberal democracies. It is through an exclusionary and reductionist understanding of the people that fascist ideas are percolated: glorifying the state, the "natural order", masculinist culture, and the "white majority" nation that the far right has gained electoral support across Europe.

Conclusion

The main contribution of this article is to argue that the democratic challenges posed by current anti-gender actors in Europe are best understood by examining the broader anti-democratic legacies persisting in liberal democracy. European liberal democracies have been shaped by the enduring legacies of capitalism, colonialism, and fascism—historical features that have left deep scars of political exclusion, inequality, and violence. In this article, we explored the relationship between these historical legacies and contemporary anti-gender politics, investigating how anti-gender actors exploit them to gain traction and spread rapidly. By giving more explicit attention to these legacies than previous literature on anti-gender mobilization, we provide critical insights into how these historical imprints facilitate and fuel anti-gender political projects, promoting an authoritarian, patriarchal, heteronormative, white and Christian social and political order.

The main conclusions are threefold. First, to understand the role that anti-gender politics plays in the erosion of democracy in Europe, research needs to connect the anti-gender phenomenon with the deeper, more entrenched, and insufficiently challenged, problems of inequality and exclusion facing European democracies. These problems lie in the legacies of capitalism, colonialism, and fascism that persist in liberal democracies and prepare fertile ground for anti-gender politics to resonate and spread among the people. This argument reverses the dominant framing in the existing literature, which typically presents anti-gender politics as drivers of de-democratization or as opportunistic allies of far-right authoritarianism. While we acknowledge that anti-gender politics do contribute to democratic backsliding- given their exclusionary, authoritarian worldviews-, we argue that the remnants of historical legacies, including entrenched structures of inequality and oppression, dominant ideological frameworks, institutional arrangements, and networks create fertile ground for anti-gender actors, and their political projects, to emerge easily and spread rapidly.

Secondly, and based on the former, we suggest a focus on knowledge produced by queer and black scholars who advocate for more just and equitable futures. Anti-capitalist, Black, feminist, and queer critiques have clearly articulated that (Western) liberal democracies have never been unproblematic or fully inclusive. For many citizens, certainly for marginalized groups, democracy has failed to materialize. Their insights and their experiences of struggle are crucial for understanding better how liberal democracies have ignored gendered, class-based, racialized and other power hierarchies. As a result, liberal democracies have institutionalized misogyny, racism, and other forms of discrimination, marginalisation, exclusion, and dehumanization into their fabric. We propose to recognise these sources of knowledge, and focus our lenses on feminist and other forms of resistance against exclusionary legacies. This will allow us to understand not only the specific phenomenon of anti-gender, but also the broader problem of inequality and exclusion that affect liberal democracies.

Thirdly, vocabulary and terminology need to be rethought accordingly. While the term "anti-gender" was very useful in pointing to the emergence of these actors, and their campaigns, it shows limitations for studying and grasping the phenomenon in its fullest sense. We therefore propose scholarships to adopt a reflexive approach to the term, and offer a literature-based critique that builds on existing scholarship that contests this label as too constraining for the social reality it describes, as it centres gender through its epistemological prism. Given the term's prominence in current scholarship, we use "anti-gender" with caution and critical awareness, not to endorse its conceptual adequacy, but to engage with the field while underscoring its epistemological and political shortcomings. The critical examination of the legacies we have explored in this article calls for a reflection on how specific legacies not only matter, but also intersect, within different contexts. Legacies must be analyzed within their unique historical and geographical contexts to fully grasp how specific historical issues have shaped their configurations. This is important for understanding the particularities of local dynamics of anti-gender (and other anti-democratic) mobilization. It also underscores the importance of recognizing how struggles to resist exclusionary effects engage with multiple legacies and their interconnections in diverse ways, depending on the country or context under consideration.

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Conny Roggeband: Writing – original draft. **Marta Rawłuszko:** Writing – original draft. **Petra Meier:** Writing – original draft. **Silvia Díaz Fernández:** Writing – original draft. **Emanuela Lombardo:** Writing – original draft. **Paloma Caravantes:** Writing – original draft.

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