

5 Anxious parents and children in danger

The family as a refuge from neoliberalism

On 13 January 2013, hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets of Paris to oppose the legalization of gay marriage. Many of them were parents with young children and the main slogans of La Manif Pour Tous, as the protest was named, included the call to resist the *familiophobie* of the state administration and to defend the “natural family” (Fassin 2014; Môser 2020). In Germany, in the southern and western regions of Baden-Württemberg and Cologne, an alliance called Concerned Parents (*Besorgte Eltern*) organized a series of protest in 2014 to oppose the new sex education curriculum initiated by the coalition of the Green Party and the Social Democratic Party of Germany. They, too, protested with slogans such as “Marriage and Family! Stop gender ideology and sexualization of our children!” (Bluhm 2015: 47–48). Very similar arguments were made by people protesting against the No Outsiders program, which was introduced in Birmingham and other British cities to familiarize pupils with gender and sexual diversity. Local Muslim leaders mobilized parents to picket in front of schools with slogans such as “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” and “We have a say in what they learn” (BBC News 2019). In the Czech Republic, conservative women formed a group called Angry Mothers to fight feminism, “genderism” and immigration. The group’s leader took the stage during an anti-immigration protest in Prague in 2015, explaining:

Today, I wish to speak on behalf of women, mothers, and, most of all, angry mothers. Because we, women, are more sensitive when it comes to injustice. We are not afraid to use our instincts that help us protect our kids from dangers and threats. And we feel very much threatened these days.

(Svatonova 2019)

In Poland, an important site of anti-gender mobilization was the mass parental movement “Save the Little Ones!”, which emerged in 2009 after the government announced its plans to lower the compulsory school age from 7 to 6. Originally, the protesters were opposing the planned reforms and generally the low quality of education in Poland. But when the “war on gender”

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Anxious parents and children in danger 115

hit the media in 2012, they joined forces with anti-genderists in contesting sex education in schools and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

While the specific causes for the mobilization of conservative groups varied, the main campaign slogans as well as the imagery employed were strikingly similar. All these movements referenced the need to protect children and families, which resonated with conservative moral panics around the family worldwide. As Paternotte and Kuhar point out, anti-gender campaigns everywhere focused on the welfare of families, children and heterosexual marriage; they even employed strikingly similar symbols and graphics: silhouettes of parents holding hands or protective gestures symbolizing the need to defend their kids (2017b: 269). The family resemblance among logos used by movements in various countries testifies to effective circulation of ideas and tactics across borders, but it also speaks to the power of the movement's central ideas: the mobilization of parents and the politicization of parenthood.

Existing scholarship analyzing anti-gender campaigns tends to interpret the “child in danger” imagery as a strategy of legitimization, explaining that “the Western construction of ‘child innocence’ is a particularly effective frame, which can rally larger crowds than anti-gender claims alone” (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017b: 265). Indeed, claiming to represent the interests of parents and children and to defend “family values” has been a tried and tested strategy of conservative cultural warriors worldwide. “Saving the children” was one of the rallying cries of the right throughout the political struggle known as the “culture wars,” which emerged in the U.S. in the mid-1970 in response to new social movements demanding gender and sexual equality (Bob 2012; Hartman 2015). Among the precursors of contemporary anti-LGBT rhetoric was Anita Bryant, a modestly successful singer and former beauty queen, who formed the organization Save Our Children Inc. in 1977 in an effort to prevent equal rights for gays and lesbians in Florida (Johnson 2018). In a fundraising letter she proclaimed:

I don't hate the homosexuals! But as a mother, I must protect my children from their evil influence. [...] They want to recruit your children and teach them the virtues of becoming homosexual.

(Fetner 2001: 411)

Calling on parents to defend their children from homosexuals is more than a mere rhetorical strategy. Anti-gender groups have recognized the political potential of deeply felt familial identities, roles and experiences and have managed to capture it. While there is nothing inherently conservative about parenthood and care, it is also true that progressive movements such as feminism have largely neglected this issue. (Eisenstein 2012; Fraser 2009; Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2015; Graff 2014b; Kováts 2020). Meanwhile, the populist right has made parenthood its focus, monopolizing issues such as broadly defined child welfare, parental rights and the well-being of the

116 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

family (in the conservative version the family is of course nuclear, heterosexual and bounded by marriage).

The strategy of mobilizing parents has been so effective because it harnesses the emotional dimension of politics, something that liberals often distance themselves from. During the last decade or so, the political, cultural and social dimension (or *sociality*) of emotions and the political consequences of “public feelings” became the object of interest of sociologists, many of them feminist and queer studies scholars (Ahmed 2004; Illouz 2007; Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003). As Eva Illouz put it:

Emotion is certainly a psychological entity, but it is no less and perhaps more so a cultural and social one: through emotion we enact cultural definitions of personhood as they are expressed in concrete and immediate but always culturally and socially defined relationships. [...] Emotions are deeply internalized and unreflexive aspects of action, but not because they do not contain enough culture and society in them, but rather because they have too much.

(2007: 3)

Among political emotions, shame holds a particularly significant position. It is more than just one of many emotions. A powerful negative affect, it is the reaction to not being recognized, to the failure of communication that constitutes identity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick emphasizes the link between shame and identity, claiming that the relationship is “at once deconstructing and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating” (2003: 36). It is this link that gives shame its political potential: shame undermines identity but also leads to efforts to re-build identity. Sara Ahmed also points at the transpersonal dimension of shame, as distinct from guilt: the latter involves the subject’s recognition of the badness of an action, but the former touches the entire self, it is “bound up with self-recognition” (2004: 114). Shame is an emotion that produces social hierarchies. Once transformed into righteous anger, it becomes a powerful tool for political mobilization (Jasper 2011). This is precisely what the populist right have achieved through anti-gender campaigns: they have managed to present the feminist and LGBT movements as shamers of the masses and enemies of the common people. Similarly effective have been the efforts to instigate fear that sex educators and trans men will harm children. The ultimate message is shame on you if you cannot prevent the demoralization of your own child.

This politics of emotions has been combined with policy measures designed to cater to families. Contemporary right-wing populist parties such as Law and Justice and Fidesz recognize the potential of parents as an electorate and have invested in a host of pro-family social policies, some of them quite generous. Since 2015 Law and Justice has introduced several pro-natalist policies focused on families with children, including 500+

Anxious parents and children in danger 117

(direct cash transfer of 500 PLN monthly for each child), increased financing of child care (from 151 million PLN in 2015 to 450 in 2018) and increased general public spending on pro-family policy from 1.78 percent of Poland's GDP in 2015 to 3.11 percent in 2017 (Gov.pl 2020; MRPiPS 2019). Ultraconservative organizations, such as Ordo Iuris, have wholeheartedly supported these changes, presenting themselves as experts and key advisers of the Law and Justice government in the realm of family policy. In Hungary, no significant anti-gender movement exists, but the anti-gender discourse has also been adopted by Fidesz (Kováts and Pető 2017). Right-wing populists readily adopted welfare chauvinism, which combines generous social policies with ultraconservative rhetoric (Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Kováts 2020; Cinpoes and Norocel 2020). These policies include a 30,000 EUR interest-free loan for every married couple if the woman is between 18 and 40 years old and pregnant, subsidized loans for such couples to build or buy a house, and grants to buy a bigger family car. Furthermore, mothers of at least four children are exempt for life from personal income tax, while grandparents can receive a bonus if they are willing to care for their grandchildren. As anonymous authors explain on the official website of the Hungarian's government: "God, marriage, family and children. There is an authenticity about Hungary's policies that speaks to Europe in these ancient, foundational times" (About Hungary 2020). In the light of these data we can safely claim that scared and concerned faces of little children in the anti-gender propaganda are not just an effort to provoke fear of genderism, but also a public relations strategy of right-wing populist governments, promoting the pro-family policies.

There is a fine line between instrumentalization and politicization of pre-existing identities, and we believe that in this case we are dealing with both. Religious groups and right-wing populists have a long history of strategically presenting themselves as apolitical grassroots movements of traditional families in order to attract wider social support. However, it is also true that grassroots movements of parents sometimes embrace conservative agendas and oppose sex education in schools, non-normative family arrangements, and sexual and reproductive rights (e.g. Højdestrand 2017; Fabian and Korolczuk 2017; Fassin 2014). In our view, there are at least three distinct ways in which the rhetoric of politicized parenthood is used in anti-gender campaigns. First, in some cases, e.g. the World Congress of Families, anti-gender activists and right-wing politicians strategically pose as a pro-family movement, in order to downplay and sanitize what is effectively a radical ultraconservative agenda. The second way in which parenthood becomes politicized is when ultraconservative actors effectively appeal to parents whose original grievances were framed in purely pragmatic terms (as in the case of "Save the Little Ones!"). Third, some grassroots parental networks exhibit an ultraconservative orientation from the start: they oppose sex education, abortion and divorce. Such groups have readily joined the anti-gender movement, attracted by its ideological content. The latter two

118 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

scenarios show that the mass appeal of the anti-gender movement has much to do with the culturally entrenched idea that parents always have the best intentions with regard to their children. Speaking as a parent is a way to authenticate one's political engagement: parenthood is a form of political identity, wherein the personal becomes political, though not in the fashion envisioned by feminists. As we will demonstrate in this chapter, it is the ability to mobilize people as concerned parents that makes the movement so powerful and effective. Anti-gender rhetoric consistently sides with community against individualism, with family and love against loneliness and alienation, with solidarity against selfishness.

The dynamic in question is part of a larger trend of populist mobilization of emotions such as fear and anger (Salmela and von Scheve 2017; Wodak 2015). Right-wing populism transforms economic grievances into a moral division between Us and Them, juxtaposing the people and corrupt elites, hence it is sometimes interpreted as moralized anti-pluralism (e.g. Mueller 2016). We complement this argument by showing that parenthood and family have become the terrain where this moralization takes place. Without explicitly mentioning neoliberalism, conservative discourses on family and parenthood effectively harness legitimate anger and shame stemming from the neoliberal condition. As observed by Sauer, it is primarily men who are targeted by this discourse, while masculinity is invoked as a fragile identity in crisis:

[...] right-wing populist parties across Europe [...] try to capture the fears of insecurity in the relations between men and women, the shame of “failed patriarchs,” in order to safeguard against commodification of labor and life, by restoring the inequality of gender relations. Moreover, neoliberal affective strategies of self-entrepreneurship, of competition and insecurity have created masculinist affective subjectivities – entitled to compensate for fear and shame by anger and irresponsibility for others.

(Sauer 2020: 33)

As we have shown in the previous chapter, a key element of the anti-gender campaigns was the narrative of “colonization” threatening local cultures. Indeed, most grassroots parental mobilizations pride themselves on being authentic and home-grown, representing the true voice of ordinary people, their everyday needs and grievances. They also criticize the trend toward the professionalization and institutionalization of civil society, which makes citizens' initiatives donor-dependent and accountable to foreign funders rather than to the constituencies they claim to represent. In the following analysis we show how right-wing populist discourses on gender employ political emotions by appealing to people as members of families, actual or potential, and stigmatizing their political opponents as bearers of loneliness and alienation.

Family heroes and motherless children: politicized parenthood in Verona and Paris

The first thing a participant of the 2019 World Congress of Families would see upon entering the Della Gran Guardia Palace in Verona was a huge banner announcing: “WELCOME FAMILY HEROES!” in both English and Italian. Indeed, panelists seemed to take on this very role in their speeches: they positioned themselves as heroic patriarchs and matriarchs, deeply concerned about the fate of the family – a sacred institution, the bulwark of Christian civilization. Talking about the family allowed the representatives of the movement, many of whom are affiliated with powerful religious institutions, to present their cause as one rooted in common sense and everyday experience rather than religion. Each panelist would start by mentioning his or her own family: their beloved wife or husband, their number of children (usually larger than three) and grandchildren. Their private lives as fathers and mothers, however, were not presented as the primary reason for public engagement. Rather, they served a strategic purpose: to avoid the stigma of hate-mongering bigots, add warmth to their public image and legitimize their engagement in political struggle (Kalm and Meuwisse 2020). The “heroes” were there to protect THE family, not their particular families. As we will see in the following section, this sets them apart from representatives of grassroots parental movements, who often perceive their public engagement as an extension of their private, familial roles.

WCF participants demonstrated an awareness of the political power of the family as an image to be weaponized in the political struggle. Here is how Edward Habsburg-Lothringen, father of six, Austrian ambassador to the Holy See and an aristocrat with quite an impressive lineage, described it in his speech:

We need to use Twitter. The best is to talk with pictures about little family moments. Positive nice stories win hearts. Let us cater to people’s wish to have a family. And the real way to have a family is Christian family.¹

In a similar vein, Claudio d’Amico, Lega party politician and member of the WCF executive committee, opened his talk with a touching story about his mother and the importance of love. He concluded with the statement: “Only the relation of a woman, man and children is a true family.”

In the WCF narrative “the family” is a discursive construct masking a homophobic and anti-choice agenda. The most important fact about their vision of “the family” is that this category excludes any familial configuration other than the heterosexual married couples with children. Speakers appeared to take for granted that audience members would share this point of view; their talks were designed to provide not only a sense of community but also to instruct fellow activists on how to build a more palatable image of an ultraconservative movement.

120 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

A somewhat different framing of family and parenthood, one that focuses mostly on kinship and biological reproduction, can be found in the French context. As many scholars note, the French anti-gender movement – represented primarily by La Manif Pour Tous (LMPT) – strives to downplay its religious origins and inspirations (e.g. Garbagnoli 2016; Môser 2020; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2017). Instead, LMPT insists on its identity as a French movement, secular and firmly grounded in local civic culture. Thus, it routinely uses “symbolic repertoires of national symbols, past social movements and anti-capitalist rhetoric, with precise local resonance” (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2017: 80).

An examination of the movement’s materials shows that this discourse is centered primarily around a particular understanding of filiation. Eric Fassin (2014) explains how filiation has been both biologized and sacralized in the French context, and how this way of thinking provides justification for opposition to gay marriage. Following legal scholar Daniel Borillo, Fassin elaborates:

if filiation is modeled after reproduction, then homosexuality could perhaps find a place in *parentalité* (parenting), but it should certainly be excluded (by definition) from *parenté* (kinship) [...]. Biology as a foundational fiction has now become the last refuge of heteronormativity.
(2014: 286–287)

This French construction of kinship explains why so much of La Manif Pour Tous propaganda focuses on protecting children from being denied the right to have both parents, or at least to know their identity. The alarmist tone of the movement’s rhetoric and a sense of acute danger threatening “the family,” however, are a common feature of most, if not, all anti-gender campaigns (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

LMPT’s visual trademark, featured on posters and banners used at demonstrations, shows the silhouette of a nuclear family with parents at the center, holding hands with two children. Many slogans stress the importance of fertility, reproduction and “natural” kinship, that is one based on biological parenthood and the legal recognition thereof. This agenda stems from LMPT’s adamant stance against gay marriage, surrogacy and availability of in vitro fertilization techniques for same-sex couples and single women. One prominent slogan, employed continuously at demonstrations on various issues, references the French revolution: “Liberté, Égalité, Paternité!” stressing the key role of parenthood and biological kinship ties to the French identity. Another demonstration poster proclaims: “There are no eggs in the testicles,” stressing that only heterosexual couples can produce offspring and warning against the chaos that will inevitably ensue if biomedicine is made available to same-sex couples (Liberation 2013). In response to the proliferation of assisted reproductive technologies, which opens up the way to new family configurations, separating genetic from gestational and social motherhood

Anxious parents and children in danger 121

and fatherhood, activists take to the streets with slogans such as “Tell me daddy, what is it like to have a mommy?”; “I am a man, not a sperm-donor” or “She doesn’t need a man, but don’t the children need a father?”

Some of the imagery used in this context denounces the exploitation of the women’s bodies, as exemplified by a poster featuring a pregnant woman’s belly with a barcode. The accompanying slogan opposes the French court’s decision to allow the adoption of a child born in Canada through gestational surrogacy. The LMPT president, Ludovine de La Rochère, claims that the possibility to conceal the identity of a surrogate mother is a violation of the fundamental rights of women and children: “The child is not born without a mother! The child is born from an unknown mother – and this is unacceptable!” (*La Manif Pour Tous*, 2018). In a similar vein, in February 2019 the activists issued a press statement protesting against the replacement of the terms “father” and “mother” in children’s school documentations with the words “parent one” and “parent two”:

We are all born from a father and a mother. This reality is incontestable and provides the basis for human equality. This equality is to be preserved just as the family, the primary space of solidarity and refuge for the vulnerable, especially in periods of crisis.

(*La Manif Pour Tous*, 2019, our translation)

Although the issue of surrogacy is especially prominent in France due to current debates on regulations concerning such procedures, the topic has a well-established place in the anti-gender movements’ political agenda. The Verona Declaration of 2019 includes the following strategic goal: “An international ban on surrogacy of any kind – a total prohibition on trade or donation of gametes – for the woman is not an incubator and the child is not a product” (*WCF Verona Declaration*, 2019). The movement’s philosophy as pronounced in the Declaration expresses profound distrust toward capitalism’s impact on family life and the value of the human being. Notably, however, nowhere is the word capitalism itself used. Instead, the document’s authors employ phrasing such as “the current cultural and economic crisis” or “commodification” of human relations and bodies. Their position is articulated in terms of morality and values, rather than systemic critique:

Sustainable economic development is not possible without reaffirming the profound link that must exist between economics and morality: the well-being of the human person must always take precedence over the pursuit of profit.

(*WCF Verona Declaration*, 2019)

In this perspective, the family – and more specifically the parent-child bond, both biological and social – becomes a sanctuary protecting people from the greed of markets and the alienating and uncontrollable developments in

122 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

science, epitomized by *l'idéologie du genre*. In the words of Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right party Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*):

[The enemies of the family] would like us to no longer have an identity and just become slaves, the perfect consumers. And so national identity, religious identity, gender identity and family identity are under attack. I must not be able to define myself as Italian, Christian, woman, mother – no, I must be citizen x, gender x, parent 1, parent 2, I must be a number. Because when I am only a number, when I no longer have an identity, when I no longer have roots, then I'll be the perfect slave at the mercy of huge financial speculation. The perfect consumer.

(Transcript from the speech at WCF in Verona, 2019.

Translation: Cecilia Santilli)

References to “financial speculations” function in radical right discourse as code for Jews, and are readily recognized as such by like-minded audiences (Wodak 2018). Meloni comes remarkably close to naming the enemy as Jews, but she does not do so for good reason. The anti-gender movements' version of conspiratorial thinking avoids explicit antisemitism and prefers to target consumerism and modernity in general. The family appears as the last frontier of opposition to global markets and their sinister power to deprive people of identity.

In both Verona and Paris the opposition to new types of familial configurations is framed in a secular discourse that is universalistic (in referencing human rights), and anti-neoliberal (in its critique of commodification and commercialization of reproduction). The absence of religious claims may come as a surprise, given the roots of the anti-gender movement, but it testifies to its present-day political ambitions. Participants of the WCF are in fact ultraconservatives, some with fascist leanings, and the event's focus on the family is aimed to convince the mainstream public that the movement is not to be feared. If we were to judge La Manif Pour Tous solely by its rhetoric, we may conclude that it is a movement of gender-traditionalists alarmed by social and cultural changes brought about by sexual revolution, women's liberation and advances in reproductive medicine. Cornelia Möser documents, however, that the origins of LMPT lie in the cooperation between various far-right, religious and neo-Nazi organizations: Action Française, the *Renouveau Français*, *Parti de la France* and various fundamentalist Christian anti-abortion groups (2020:120). Thus, the defense of the family and the mobilization of parenthood becomes a smokescreen for what is really a far-right political project. While the term family is repeated endlessly in anti-gender discourse and while it is sentimentalized to convey love, connection and community, the actual aim is that of gaining political power. As Claudio D'Amico, a prominent Lega member, proclaimed in Verona: “We will win in the next European elections, the pro-family [politicians] will be the majority in the European Parliament.”

Parental movements as a conservative response to neoliberalism

There is an interesting difference between the rhetoric prevalent in Verona or Paris and the narratives disseminated by grassroots parental activists, especially in Eastern Europe. In France, where the status of citizen takes priority over private roles, such as mother and father, the anti-gender movement strives to include parenthood in the realm of politics. Hence the resonance of slogans such as “Liberté, Égalité, Paternité!” used by LMPT. In contrast, Polish or Czech activists tend to legitimize their claims by distancing themselves from politics and through references to apparently more “authentic” and culturally valued familial commitments (Korolczuk 2017; Kubik 2000; Svatonova 2019). Whereas the representatives of the WCF and LMPT often employ an abstract conceptualization of the family as a treasured value to be protected against “genderists,” in the Polish and Czech context leaders of conservative groups tend to legitimize their engagement by emphasizing their identity as parents or grandparents.

Existing analyses of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia show that many activists indeed perceive their social engagement as an extension of their parental experiences and identities (Fabian and Korolczuk 2017; Hryciuk 2017; Korolczuk 2017). It is as parents that they can transgress the public-private divide; they conceptualize political activism as a result of insights gained in the process of raising children. Being a parent is viewed as a morally superior position allowing people to be future-oriented and responsible for the well-being of society. The mission statement of the socially conservative Mother and Father Foundation (*Fundacja Mamy i Taty*) states:

Nothing sharpens your social sensibility as much as becoming a parent. Thanks to our children we look at the world around us with new eyes, asking ourselves what has or can have influence on children’s upbringing, safety, and their future. Thus, it is not a coincidence that mothers and fathers often become leaders of different, very active social movements or consumer groups, motivated by honest concern for their children and their future.

(Fundacja Mamy i Taty 2020)

Very similar rhetoric is noted by Eva Svatonova (2019), who interviewed a number of women engaged in Czech anti-gender campaigns. When asked about motivations for joining the movement, one activist stated: “I did not engage in activism as a member of a party, but as a mother and a grandmother” (Svatonova 2019). It is this type of politicization of parenthood that we focus on in this chapter, aiming to explain the mass involvement of parents in anti-gender campaigns.

We draw mostly on examples from Central and Eastern Europe (including the Czech Republic, Poland, Russia and Ukraine) with the aim of shedding some light on the sources of mass appeal of anti-gender propaganda in the

124 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

region. We claim that the emotional power of anti-genderism may lie not only in effectively fueling the moral panic around “sexualization of children,” but also in promoting and exploiting the view of the “traditional” family as a nexus of solidarity, the last frontier of social cohesion, a defense against rampant individualism and consumerism. These are not empty claims. Depending on the context and specific needs of local populations, the movements in question address the state’s failures in the realm of care (e.g. Hryciuk 2017). Opponents of “gender ideology” attribute the growing precariousness of everyday lives to the erosion of community and family for which they blame feminists and proponents of the sexual revolution. The source of hope, on the other hand, is in being together: as families, as communities, as good people who love their children. In effect, parental movements have evolved into an alternative to liberal civil society promoted in the transition era (Fabian and Korolczuk 2017; Kubik 2000).

In Poland, the parental movement with greatest public visibility was the mass resistance against the government’s plan to lower compulsory school age, which emerged around 2009 and later institutionalized into the “Ombudsman for Parents’ Rights” Foundation. Led by the couple Karolina and Tomasz Elbanowski, the “Save the Little Ones!” movement collected 1.6 million signatures nationwide under petitions against this reform: early scholarization was demonized as an outrage against a carefree and innocent childhood. Mr. and Mrs. Elbanowski became household names in Poland due to their many public appearances and the media interest in their growing family (by 2018 they were proud parents of eight). They often talked about their children, claiming that their social engagement against school reform grows out of concern for the kids’ well-being. As a vivid example of building political capital on parenthood, the Elbanowskis initially presented the initiative as a politically neutral single-cause movement gathering people of diverse views and backgrounds, a grassroots rebellion against the repressive school system. In 2012, however, they joined the unsuccessful campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention coordinated by the anti-gender alliance. By 2015 they were appointed as an advisory NGO by the Ministry of Education, generously funded by the Law and Justice government. This development illustrates what may seem as a cooptation of a grassroots movement, but can also be interpreted as a natural move for the leaders who never hid their socially conservative views on family life and parenthood.

A different trajectory is exemplified by the Mother and Father Foundation, which was openly ultraconservative from the outset. Its founders aimed to counteract cultural and social changes such as the proliferation of divorce, abortion and “homosexual propaganda” in schools and in media (Korolczuk 2017). The foundation did not strive to become a mass movement, but strove to impact society through media campaigns condemning contraception, divorce and LGBT activism. The 2019 campaign under the slogan “Marriage: Our way of life,” which aimed to promote heterosexual marriage,

Anxious parents and children in danger 125

was widely discussed in mainstream media, because it was financed from the Justice Fund, administered by the Ministry of Justice and earmarked for supporting the victims of crimes. Responding to the allegations of misappropriation of funds, the foundation's spokesman explained that they had analyzed Polish and international data on crime rates, and the results suggest that the type of family in which the children are raised influences the propensity to commit crimes in adulthood, and good, stable marriage can protect people from engaging in criminal activity (Fundacja Mamy i Taty 2019). Echoing arguments used by the religious right in the U.S. in the 1970 and 1980s (Dowland 2015), the Mother and Father Foundation presents the protection of family values as a remedy for social ills. At the same time, its representatives employ the language of human rights and freedoms, accusing the left, especially the LGBT movement, of hijacking and misusing these concepts.

These two parental initiatives emerged independently of each other around 2009 and eventually joined forces with the anti-gender movement. In both cases activists presented themselves as the advocates and protectors of children: while mobilization against education reform went public with the phrase "Save the Little Ones!", the Mother and Father Foundation's main slogan is "The Whole of Poland Protects Children." As already indicated, similar initiatives emerged in many Eastern European countries. Czech parental groups, such as the Angry Mothers and the Czech Traditional Family, became key supporters of religious authorities and ultraconservative politicians opposing the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018 (Svatonova 2019). In the Ukrainian context, a socially conservative parents' organization was established in 2011, called the Parents' Committee of Ukraine, PCU (*Roditel'skiy komitet Ukrainy*) (Strelnyk 2017). The Russian grassroots mobilization in the defense of traditional family values included over 80 organizations, groups and networks that Tova Höjdestrand (2017) termed the Parents' Movement (*Roditel'skoe Dvizhenie*). It is not only parents who get involved, however. As shown by Roman Kuhar (2017), in Slovenia the engagement of grandparents in the campaign around the second referendum on marriage equality led to a change in the logo used by the movement. All these initiatives have emerged prior to, or at the very beginning of, anti-gender mobilizations in their respective contexts, responding to both the global economic crisis and to what at the time was seen as the victory of progressive liberalism (e.g. signaled by the legalization of marriage equality in many countries and EU-driven gender mainstreaming policies in CEE).

The ultraconservative response to neoliberalism merges cultural and economic liberalism, presenting "the return to the family" as a viable alternative, both on the personal and political level. Ethnographic research confirms that many parental activists genuinely cherish conservative values as central to their worldview (Höjdestrand 2017; Strelnyk 2017; Svatonova 2019). It is as defenders of the "traditional family" that they oppose specific state

126 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

policies, such as cuts in welfare provisions, lack of economic support for families or lowering the school age in order for children to enter educational system and the work force sooner. Activists frame these problems in moral as well as economic terms: as changes paving the way for demoralization, rampant individualism, the demise of family and community, which leaves common people at the mercy of global economic powers.

Parent-activists often present themselves as defenders of true democracy and rejuvenators of the spirit of community. A vivid example of such a stance is the report produced by the Mother and Father Foundation in Poland, entitled “Against Freedom and Democracy – The political strategy of the LGBT lobby in Poland and in the world: Goals, tools and consequences.” This document presents the fight against LGBT rights and gender equality education in schools as an expression of civic-mindedness, responsibility and commitment to the well-being of the larger community. In a similar vein, the Ordo Iuris Institute continuously engages parents of school children in petition drives against sex and anti-discriminatory education. In 2019 the foundation’s lawyers prepared a special website addressed to parents entitled *Dla Rodziców* (For Parents), featuring a guidebook on “Parents’ Rights in Schools” and an information brochure “How to Stop Vulgar Sex Education in Schools?” Parents could also download a preformatted “Parental Declaration” to be submitted to the homeroom teacher at the beginning of a school year, preventing their child from taking part in any extracurricular activities that may have anything to do with gender, sexuality or anti-discrimination education. From a feminist perspective such efforts seem like examples of manipulation, but ultraconservatives view them as civic activism. As early as 2013 the ultraconservative pundit Tomasz Terlikowski claimed that parental initiatives, such as “Save the Little Ones!”, the Mother and Father Foundation and the Marches for Life and Family organized in several Polish cities, constitute evidence that “Polish civil society is thriving and the republican spirit is not dead” (2013).

The critique of individualism on the part of parental movements goes beyond the debate on lifestyle choices and demographic trends. It is highly emotional, but it is also issue-focused, and at times remarkably specific in its demands and grievances. Activists address specific social policies, e.g. cuts in the sphere of education which lead to the closing of local schools or the lack of investment in high quality care for children. In Poland, activists engaged in the “Save the Little Ones!” campaign not only opposed the school-age reform, but also advocated in favor of state subsidies for textbooks and educational materials for children. They also initiated an informational campaign helping parents to get tax exemptions. In Russia, most parental organizations combine advocacy, critique of the lack of public support for families and self-help activities. While Russian activists regularly take part in writing petitions and organizing conferences, many of them have also engaged in organizing help for families in need: vacation homes for multiple-child families, summer camps or leisure activities for

Anxious parents and children in danger 127

whole families (Höjdestrand 2017). They stressed the need for solidarity and local community building and engaged in “grassroots charity,” e.g. in “assisting families in dire need by pooling resources (toys, clothes, money, help with renovations, legal advice, etc.) or finding others who can help out” (2017: 43). The Parents’ Committee of Ukraine, cooperating closely with the Orthodox Church, focused mostly on “anti-gender” education and advocacy, but even this organization occasionally addressed the economic and social conditions faced by parents in contemporary Ukraine (Strelnyk 2017:65).

Analyses of parental mobilizations show that linking a socially conservative stance with opposition toward some aspects of consumerism and individualism results in a very ambiguous relation to the state. Similarly to some feminist thinkers representing the maternalist strand (Ruddick 1995; O’Reilly 2009), parental movements interpret the family as the basic social, economic and emotional unit, which stands in contrast to the neoliberal practice of individualism. Hence, both strands of activism call for policies that would protect and support families, such as sufficient maternal leave, cash transfers in the form of benefits paid to families with children or good quality education. In contrast to feminists, however, conservative actors define the family very narrowly and do not recognize the rights and conflicting interests of individual members within the family. Hence, they oppose the state as the source of regulations influencing parent-child relations. For example, the representatives of the Polish parental organizations support the state’s more active role in providing for stay-at-home mothers, but strongly resist mandatory sex education; they advocate for greater financial and institutional support of the family, but harshly criticize state interventions within the family, e.g. when parents abuse their children. This explains why these organizations joined forces with ultraconservative opponents of ratification of the Istanbul Convention: the argument was that the state should not interfere in relations between family members.

Emphasis on the need to re-establish paternal authority and hostility against measures counteracting gender-based violence is what attracts many fathers’ rights groups to anti-gender campaigns, even though they rarely form the backbone of anti-gender networks. The majority of such groups were established in reaction to custody and alimony conflicts, but in some countries the activists joined forces with the anti-gender movement (Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2017; Strelnyk 2017). This tendency has been prominent in Poland, where one of the main fathers’ rights groups, Brave Dad (*Dzielny Tata*), took part in several anti-gender rallies and mobilized their members to participate via a website and Facebook page.

In Italy, father’s rights, specifically changes in divorce regulations, became a focal point of gender-related struggles. A 2018 law drafted by Senator Simone Pillon from the Lega party, one of the leaders of the anti-gender movement in the country and a speaker at WCF in Verona, proposed to change custody rules significantly. Presented as a way to achieve “perfect

128 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

shared parenting” and prevent “parental alienation syndrome,” the bill was meant to force children to share their time equally between the divorced parents, liquidate child support and cause women who falsely accuse their former spouses of domestic violence to lose custody rights (Giuffrida 2018; Martin 2018). Italian women’s organizations vigorously protested, claiming that this would effectively erase decades of women’s struggle for equal rights and profoundly destabilize children’s lives (Stagni 2018). Clearly, some anti-gender initiatives aimed at defending children and stability of the family profoundly undermine the rights of women. The Italian case reveals the value system underlying the anti-gender position: in the end women’s emancipation and family values are opposed to each other, and women need to be disciplined into compliance. This explains why so much anti-gender activism across Europe has been focused on preventing the passage of the Istanbul Convention. The suggestion that violence against women is not a real problem is what draws openly misogynistic men’s movements toward anti-genderism.

The cooperation between conservative parental movements and the state evolves along with shifts in the political context. In Italy, the Pillon law was shelved partly due to public outrage fueled by the feminist movement but mainly because Lega lost its majority in parliament in 2019. In Poland, ultraconservative organizations gained financial support and political influence thanks to the electoral victory of Law and Justice. Speaking against the plans for lowering the schooling age in the Polish parliament, before the 2015 elections, Karolina Elbanowska asserted: “We are discriminated against as parents in this country. We feel oppressed by the state [which does not listen to us]” (Elbanowska 2015, our translation). After the Law and Justice party ascended to power, however, this organization became engaged in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education, despite the fact that the reform proposed by the government was heavily criticized by many parents and experts, not least because it was not sufficiently consulted with the parents. This shows that conservative parental movements strive for a version of a non-intrusive socially conservative welfare state. Such a state promotes pro-natalist policies and offers high quality social services for in-groups, while respecting the autonomy of parents when it comes to children’s upbringing and education. It also excludes the out-groups, such as migrants, refugees and non-normative families. The emotional dynamic behind these political preferences is a mixture of suspicion (toward the state – as potentially oppressive and always under suspicion of being too liberal) and pride (my family is my castle). The anti-gender discourse, with its valorization of family, community and paternal authority, was readily appropriated by these actors as it resonated with their commitments and values.

To sum up, today’s anti-gender campaigns combine gender conservatism with a critique of neoliberal globalization and support for social policies supporting families. As noted above, socially conservative parental activists

Anxious parents and children in danger 129

seldom, if ever, use the word neoliberalism but they do address many aspects of economic, social and cultural changes associated with this phenomenon. Through constantly oscillating between economic and moral arguments (accusing their enemy of greed and demoralization), anti-gender discourse creates a compelling story about a conflict of values in the modern world. This narrative involves a call for the protection of the people against what is seen as excessive focus on the individual and family relativism. As we elaborate in Chapter 4, “gender ideology” is viewed as a global colonial plot. The logic of resistance is simple: while families, especially strong “traditional” families, can oppose economic and cultural colonization, individuals become easy prey for the colonizers. The endangered child is the emotional center of all this: parents are called upon to become engaged in the struggle for the sake of their children. And many of them have responded.

The parental role legitimizes conservative efforts for social change. Anti-genderists present themselves as oriented toward the common good and the best of possible futures, while portraying feminists and “genderists” as a threat to children and a cause of dissolution of family, the rise of loneliness and depression. The following section examines a particularly poignant campaign, which builds a powerful associative link between the negative effects of capitalism and feminism, accusing the two of having deprived ordinary Polish women of the dignity of motherhood and a chance for personal happiness.

Shaming the shamers, protecting the not-yet-born: the political emotions of anti-genderism

Anti-gender campaigners worldwide routinely use shocking representations of children in their social media campaigns, brochures, posters and banners, as well as propaganda materials. The image of a terrified child is a powerful tool for mobilizing strong emotions such as anxiety, guilt, fear and shame. One case in point is the striking poster used as background for the “Stop Sexualization” campaign, featuring faces of confused pre-schoolers looking straight into the camera with an expression suggesting plea for help and a large slogan “Stop sexualizing our children.” Visitors of the website are thus appealed to as adults who are responsible for the welfare of children and who should be shocked into action. Another example of such rhetoric can be found in banners from 2015 demonstration against sex education in Polish schools proclaiming: “Gender is danger” and “Children belong to parents since the beginning of time. Sex educator – persona non grata!”. In a documentary film titled “Dusk: Gender Ideology Offensive” (*Zmierzch – Ofensywa ideologii gender*, Dublański 2019) produced by the “Polish Soil” Foundation (*Fundacja Polska Ziemia*) in cooperation with ultraconservative Catholic channel TV Trwam most of the speakers are middle-age priests, but at one point the audience is addressed by a plea for help voiced by a

130 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

child. This sentimental message comes to us in voice-over while we watch a blurred image of children playing in a park:

Childhood is beautiful. But when someone tells me about adult-only things, I am overtaken by fear. My childhood world is irreversibly damaged. Do not deprive me of happy memories and innocence for the sake of experiments you want to prove right. A child should not see everything. [...] My dear Mommy, Daddy I am just a child! Only you can defend me and my small world against evil. I cannot do it on my own!
(our translation)

The message here is clear: a powerful link exists between “gender ideology” and child abuse; between LGBT rights and pedophilia. In the film, the naive cry for help expressed by the child’s voice is directly preceded by footage about the signing of the LGBT+ Charter by the mayor of Warsaw in spring 2019. It is suggested that concerned parents should defend their offspring’s innocence against predatory attacks from both the gay movement and the liberal administration. This is similar to the tactic of shaming one’s audience by suggesting that they have failed to save the helpless unborn from abortion, which is persistently employed by the global anti-choice movement (Mason 2019; Rohlinger 2002; Saurette and Gordon 2018). Interestingly, as the anti-gender discourse appeals to the audience in its capacity of parents and protectors, this logic has been extended to children not yet conceived and never to be born. The children may be concrete, insofar as actual children’s faces, sad and fearful ones, are used to evoke strong emotions. However, they may also be abstract and absent, referencing the depopulated future world, dominated by loneliness and alienation resulting from the possible victory of “gender ideology.”

In June 2015 the Mother and Father Foundation inaugurated its pronatalist campaign with a 30-second video titled “Don’t put motherhood off” (*Nie odkładaj macierzyństwa na potem*). The clip features a woman in what appears to be her late thirties wandering aimlessly about a huge, modern and oddly empty house. We watch her walk an elegantly furnished but disturbingly empty interior, taking stock of her life:

I managed to pass my specialization and have a successful career, I managed to go to Tokyo and Paris, I managed to buy an apartment and renovate a house. But I did not manage to become a mom. I regret this.
(Fundacja Mamy i Taty 2015, our translation)

As the video moves toward its closure, a tear rolls down the woman’s cheek, while sad music gives way to muted voices of small children. The clip’s final message is delivered in a tone of advice, warning and solicitude: “Don’t put motherhood off for later.”

The short film enjoyed an astonishing cultural resonance: it went viral on the internet (over 400,000 views) and was heatedly discussed for months

Anxious parents and children in danger 131

in various media outlets. The campaign gave rise to innumerable satirical memes, reflecting a desire to laugh away and ridicule the specter of the miserable childless woman propagated by the ultraconservatives. Some of the memes featured “shameful confessions” of famous people who somehow did not manage to become parents. The childless woman was replaced by childless right-wing politicians (including Jarosław Kaczyński) or fictional characters such as Jon Snow (Kit Harington) of *Game of Thrones*, or the Witcher, warrior-hero of the celebrated Polish-made computer game and Netflix series. Some memes used the clip’s formula to make openly feminist arguments. In one, a happy-looking man boasts having “managed” to do everything, including becoming a dad, because a woman slaved away for him at home. In another, a sad woman says she did not manage to become a mother because her female partner died, and their child was taken off to an orphanage. A popular meme featured the heroine of the original clip with the following caption “Don’t put motherhood off. Give it up altogether!” (see Figure 5.1). Rather predictably, there were also memes with childless bishops and the Pope.

Nie odkładaj macierzyństwa na potem zrezygnuj z niego



Figure 5.1 Screenshot of the meme responding to the campaign “Don’t Put Motherhood Off.”

Source: Memy.pl, 2015.

132 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

What makes this fleeting cultural moment worth re-examining is the way it partakes in the campaign against “gender ideology,” employing the discourse of embattled parenthood. Viewed outside of its immediate context – i.e. a country in the midst of anti-gender campaign, heading swiftly for a right-wing populist regime – the clip might appear like yet another example of a familiar media trend: that of blaming feminism for the “infertility epidemic” and the sad lives of women who opted for careers and now regret their childlessness. In her history of 20th-century U.S. feminism, Ruth Rosen recalls that in the late 1980s a popular T-shirt featured a similar image with the text “Oh dear, I forgot to have children!” (2000: 335). Discussed at length in Susan Faludi’s *Backlash* (1992: 46–58), the miserable-childless-woman-who-regrets-her-choices continues to thrive as a popular media narrative. Two recent examples include Tanya Selvaratnam’s book *The Big Lie: Motherhood, Feminism, and the Reality of the Biological Clock* (2014) and Susan Shapiro’s *New York Times* autobiographical essay “Childless, With Regret and Advice” (2015). The latter may in fact have inspired the Mother and Father Foundation, as it appeared online just weeks before the filming of the clip. The article ends with a confession that is almost identical to the latter’s voiceover lesson: “By 50, I felt blessed in work, love and real estate. Yet some nights I’m haunted walking by the empty room in our apartment” (Shapiro 2015).

Each time the regretful wealthy childless woman appears in public discourse, her sorry predicament is presented as a new and alarming discovery, an unveiling of feminism’s alleged big lie. Feminism is accused of having convinced women that childbearing can be put off indefinitely, and here comes the much needed wake-up call. The women featured in such stories are filled with shame, regret and resentment: they blame feminism and their own selfishness. The social fall-out of such campaigns is the stigmatization of career-women and the pitting of mothers against childless women. The emotion most prominent in such messaging is shame. Heedless of biology, besotted with consumerism, intoxicated by ambition, “forgetful women” are presented as those who failed to reproduce and now regret it. Indeed, they have failed as women and feminism is put to shame for having destroyed their lives. The witness to the shaming here is the imagined unborn child, the unfulfilled possibility of personal happiness. In the clip, it is the spectral child or children crying in the background without appearing on screen. Just as in the familiar backlash narrative, so too in anti-gender discourse, childlessness – the opposite of joyful parenthood – is presented as a source of profound regret and misery.

There is also a class dimension to this narrative. In the clip, childlessness-due-to-postponement is represented as a middle-upper-middle class predicament, caused not just by excessive emancipation, but by too much wealth, too much comfort, too much consumption. The shaming and humiliation of the woman portrayed in the film are protracted and meant to fill us (the viewers) with *Schadenfreude*. We are invited to witness her shame and enjoy

Anxious parents and children in danger 133

it. Meanwhile, she herself is silenced – the voice-over, thoughts spoken in first person, is delivered in another woman’s voice. The luxurious setting of her misery constitutes an important clue to the viewer’s intended response. The combination of luxury, minimalist design and sparse furnishing is profoundly alienating. In the Polish context, where most homes aim for a look of warmth and coziness, it appears foreign. The same can be said about the woman’s expensive clothes: stiletto heels, beige trousers and shirt all suggest a corporate environment inimical to feminine warmth. She is dressed to compete, a style foreign to mainstream Polish tastes and the Polish ideal of femininity as motherhood. The foreign-looking setting invites hostility rather than sympathy toward the suffering woman. She chose to be emancipated, modern and Western, so her suffering is deserved.

The actress who played the role of the childless victim of excessive ambition claims that after the release of the campaign she found herself on the receiving end of spontaneous hostility from strangers. As she was unaware of the political intention behind the script, the intensity of public response that followed the spot’s release shocked and wounded her. “For me it was simply a job,” she told us in an interview “but people seemed to think it was all true. They took me for an emancipated, selfish rich bitch who forgot to have children. They would stare me down in the street to show me how much they despised me. There was also a lot of hate on Facebook” (personal communication, 08 August 2017). The hostility should not surprise us. The clip was a set-up, an act of public shaming and an invitation to further put-downs. Its carefully orchestrated sequence of images and sounds was meant to elicit a strong emotional reaction – to unsettle and infuriate. Shame, unlike guilt, is a public feeling. Thus, the goal of the ultraconservatives is to put the liberal elites – the alleged shamers of the people – to shame.

Given the context of Poland in 2015 – the cultural atmosphere set up by rampant xenophobia, media talk about the need to defend Polish culture against western “colonization” and the anti-gender discourse that linked all these themes – the source of shame in the clip is easily located. The heroine is childless because she has allowed herself to become westernized and seduced by feminism. She has only herself to blame: she has travelled as far as Tokyo, but has failed to produce her own (Polish) babies. She is uprooted, homeless in her own home because her space has been colonized by a foreign force, that she herself invited and followed. The real villain here is not the woman herself but the force responsible for her terrible choices: a force associated with wealth, travel and personal ambition, a force that is also somehow foreign. It is embodied in the look of house, modern and impersonal, the expensive objects that fill it, the way the woman is dressed, the way she inhabits her living space, almost like a visitor. She inhabits a house that is haunted by what the ultraconservatives call gender – the immoral core of the liberal West.

The clip never mentions “gender,” but the connection to the anti-gender campaign is evident. The Mother and Father Foundation has long been

134 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

involved in promoting “family values,” understood as the prevention of divorce, warning couples against the alleged harm caused by hormonal contraception, and honoring the hard work of fathers. The clip went viral at a time of intense political and social polarization around gender issues. Its central theme – motherhood – was heavily politicized within the “war against gender.” Two Polish anti-gender books published during the preceding year, both authored by women, insist that “genderism” is responsible for the infertility epidemic and that it undermines the dignity of motherhood (Niewińska 2014; Nykiel 2014). In fact, the women who spoke publicly against gender at the time usually did so as mothers or prospective mothers and claimed that social hostility toward motherhood is feminism’s fault.

In Poland, anti-genderism expresses in moralistic terms what is really a deep-seated hostility toward the West, associated with excessive consumption, individualism and precarity. The West is also routinely accused of degrading motherhood, encouraging women to undergo abortions and use contraception. The motivation ascribed to these practices is profit mongering – according to anti-genderists, pharmaceutical companies are behind it all, driven by greed and the desire to de-populate the world, especially to limit the population of societies that still adhere to traditional values (Nykiel 2014). Viewed in this context, the childless woman clip embodies a gendered critique of western capitalism. The aptly named Mother and Father Foundation steps into the role of benevolent grandparent, warning Polish women about the dangers of succumbing to western values.

The clip’s message echoes one of the key tropes in the anti-gender campaigns, that of looming de-population. It is here that the religious ultraconservative critique of “gender ideology” meets neo-fascist tendencies and authoritarian discourse of a “demographic winter” promoted by Putin, as well as the discourses of Great Replacement and “white genocide” promoted by the global alt-right (Hennig 2019; Gökariksel, Neubert and Smith 2018; Stern 2019). As Gökariksel, Neubert and Smith (2018) show in their comparative analysis of the U.S., Turkey and India, there exists a striking similarity between cultural narratives deployed by the authoritarian and populist leaders in these countries. The narratives, which the scholars call “demographic fever dreams” are political fantasies – excessive, unfounded and seemingly absurd – designed to evoke panic about an imagined threat to the vulnerable majority population from religious, sexual and racial others. “Fundamentally, these fever dreams are motivated by the fears of the dominant population being made a surplus population” (Gökariksel, Neubert and Smith 2018: 566): outnumbered, displaced and eventually forgotten. The clip can be read as one such dream, an apocalyptic vision in which future Poland is but an empty house, populated by voices of children that never got a chance to be born.

Conclusions

Parenthood, actual and potential, is at the heart of cultural conflict known as the gender wars, in most contexts strongly intertwined with nationalist

Anxious parents and children in danger 135

sentiments. This is not to say that the right has a monopoly on politicized parental identity. Well-known examples of left-wing mobilization of mothers include Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America and the Mothers of De Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, as well as the single mothers' movement in Poland (Fell and Voas 2006; Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2015). Both progressive and reactionary movements employ the essentialist argument that women as mothers and caregivers are naturally predisposed to care for the world at large (Ruddick 1995). Today's anti-gender activists have been effective in politicizing the discourse of parenthood and mobilizing people in its defense, extending these arguments to men in their paternal role as defenders of the family, whose authority is viewed as natural, much like women are endowed with maternal qualities. As we have shown in this chapter, this is achieved on two levels. First, traditional parental roles are presented as under siege by "gender ideology" and in need of protection in order to mobilize large groups of people. Secondly, ultraconservative movements valorize parental roles and experiences as a basis for political engagement and new forms of political community. Clearly, there is something about the contemporary state of societies that makes parenthood an attractive political identity. We argue that it results from the social, economic and cultural effects of neoliberalism, a system that not only brings about precarity but also drastically devalues the human experience of familial relations and care.

Anti-gender movements skillfully link the cultural with the economic and the political by combining a socially conservative agenda with a critique of some aspects of neoliberalism. The activists representing these movements oppose neoliberalism interpreted as (1) a value system equated with the promotion of rampant individualism and the demise of family and community, (2) an economic trend equated with a lack of state support for families and minimal investments in social services and (3) a political trend equated with the colonization of local communities by liberal actors alienated from "the common people" and supported by foreign global powers. This discursive construction, combined with efforts to re-build local communities and advocacy for the rights of the families, enables socially conservative actors to effectively tap into people's sense of economic anxiety and disillusionment with political elites. Anti-gender rhetoric works because it reorients collective anger away from structural economic issues and toward moral ones. In the process, anti-genderism endows subjects with the memory of an imagined shame and with the promise of a new dignity; it offers moral satisfaction (our enemies are evil but miserable), a sense of purpose and a community.

Anti-genderism conflates "gender" with those aspects of capitalism that are most frustrating to members of the working and lower-middle class, especially to parents and would-be parents: precarity and the crisis of care resulting from unequal distribution of wealth. Instead of naming the problem in economic terms, as injustice and exploitation, anti-genderism presents the world of capitalism's winners as degenerate and morally corrupt, an emotional wasteland destroyed by greed and consumption, peopled by regretful childless women, men deprived of their paternal roles, lonesome

136 *Anxious parents and children in danger*

and anxious children. Like the expensive but unwelcoming house in the clip, it is a cold universe cluttered with useless objects. Ultraconservatives – just like the right-wing populists – aim to convince people who stand little chance of becoming the winners in the neoliberal race for success that they have already won what is most important in life: family, love and a sense of community. Simultaneously, right-wing populist governments deliver social policies such as cash transfers to families with children, thus responding to the actual needs of the people and easing the burdens resulting from raising children. The opportunistic synergy between ultraconservatives and right-wing populists is grounded in recognition of the value of the family in the abstract and redistribution of resources to “our” families. With socially conservative actors successfully claiming the language of anti-neoliberalism and populist governments building their appeal on generous social provisions, feminism and the left face serious challenges in articulating their opposition toward the reign of global capital.

Note

- 1 All quotations from WCF in Verona 2019 are based on the authors’ notes from the event and recordings available online on the Facebook page of the event. We are grateful to Cecilia Santilli for help with transcripts and translation.