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Disentangling radical right populism, gender, and religion: an introduction

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ABSTRACT

This Special Issue provides diverse multidisciplinary entry points that convey the multi-layered complexity of the interactions between radical right populism, gender issues, and religious questions. It fills a gap in the scholarship dealing with the political and social manifestations of radical right populism. From a theoretical point of view, the connections between radical right populism and gender and between radical right populism and religion, respectively, have received growing scholarly attention. The present Special Issue bridges these separate lines of inquiry, concentrating on how issues of gender and religion are jointly addressed in radical right populist discourses. The articles in this Special Issue provide the first in-depth and comparative understanding of the entanglements of gender and religion in radical right populist ideology, explore the active role of religion in the populist discourse, and invite to combine the analysis of the political sphere with the analysis of occurrences in the broader society.

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KEYWORDS Gender; radical right populism; religion; Global North; Global South

Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed the growing rise to prominence of radical right populist forces. Examples include the significant electoral victories registered by radical right populist parties across Europe such as the (Northern) League in Italy, the Sweden Democrats in Sweden and the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. The 2010s in particular were a decade when these political forces moved from the peripheries into the political mainstream. In radical right populist discourses, gender – and the particularly biological and binary conception thereof – has been employed to reclaim a position of hegemony for the heterosexual masculinity embodied by the leader, such as Brazilian President Bolsonaro's statement that he is 'proudly

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homophobic'.¹ In the European context also, such constructions of native masculinities are in opposition to migrants' masculinities, which are conceived of as dangerous, subaltern and a threat to 'our women'. Women's bodies become, yet again, the sacred place of the nation and subject to male competition and control. This enables a discursive articulation of anti-immigration stances as concern for (especially native) women's rights and feminism, the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, and defence of the (native) majority's religion or apparent lack thereof.

Radical right populist parties across Europe apply a seemingly incongruent twofold political strategy. On the one hand, they proclaim their commitment to protecting and promoting traditional 'family values', understood as vehement anti-feminist policies, and opposition to protecting and extending further social and political rights to the LGBTQ+ community. On the other hand, they claim to be interested in defending existing gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, assimilated into a growingly secularized worldview, against the slowly growing (Muslim) migrant population who are resolutely described as archaically patriarchal, fervently religious, and violently intolerant. Illustratively, the French National Rally under the leadership of Marine Le Pen proclaimed its commitment to defending women's rights. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Party of Freedom warned that the 'freedom that gay people should have – to kiss each other, to marry, to have children – is exactly what Islam is fighting against'.² These processes of co-opting the gender equality endeavours and the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights revive the longstanding racializing discourse of White nations pitted against 'uncivilized Others', which is underpinned by a particular understanding of their Judaeo-Christian roots.

At the same time, in these discourses, religion – Christianity in particular – is often framed as constitutive of national identity. In Italy, the League's chair Matteo Salvini mobilized Catholicism discursively on various occasions, such as brandishing a rosary during a rally on the eve of the 2019 European Parliament elections³ or demonstratively kissing a crucifix during a debate in the Italian Parliament when accused of 'undermining the principle of secularism of the modern state'.⁴ In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats' chair Jimmie Åkesson admitted in a speech in July 2015 that while his party succeeded in convincing men to vote for the party's socially conservative agenda 'with regard to defence policy, immigration policy, in terms of criminal policy'⁵ the party was still avoided by women because 'its efforts and vision for a secure and prosperous society' focused too much on protecting them from Muslim men and did not pay enough attention to women's specific welfare concerns.

With these empirical illustrations in mind, the present Special Issue provides diverse multidisciplinary entry points that convey the multi-layered complexity of the interactions between radical right populism, gender issues,

and religious questions. Consequently, it fills a gap in the scholarship dealing with the political and social manifestations of radical right populism. Indeed, from a theoretical point of view, the connection between radical right populism and gender and, respectively, between radical right populism and religion has received growing scholarly attention. The present Special Issue bridges these separate lines of inquiry, concentrating on how issues of gender and religion are jointly addressed in radical right populist discourses.

Radical right populism and gender/religion: conceptual juxtapositions and clarifications

At present, there have been some scholarly attempts to systematize knowledge on the intersections between radical right populism, gender, and religion, although most of them comprise standalone articles (Ben-Porat et al., 2021; Singh and Féron 2021). We identified six Special Issues and edited volumes, which focus expressly on gender and radical right populism in its various labelling, such as ‘radical right’ (Erzeel and Rashkova 2017; Spierings et al. 2015); ‘radical and extreme right’ (Miller-Idriss and Pilkington 2017); ‘far right’ (Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017); or simply ‘global Right’ (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019) or ‘right-wing’ (Dietze and Roth 2020). Of these, three contain mainly contributions from political science, one from the education sciences, and one from gender studies. In addition, one Special Issue has explicitly addressed the issue of religion and ‘populism’ (DeHanas and Shterin 2018), and one edited volume examined the issues of populism, gender, and religion (Fitzi, Mackert, and Turner 2019).

The earliest Special Issue was published in *Patterns of Prejudice* (Spierings et al. 2015). Establishing its point of departure in the chapter titled *Männerparteien* (Mudde 2007), this Special Issue acknowledged the pioneering work of some scholars that examined the relationship between the extreme right and women (Amesberger and Halbmayr 2002), how radical right populist discourses in Northern Europe are gendered (Meret and Siim 2013; Norocel 2010), and the relationship between gender and Islam in the party programmes (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007; Betz and Meret 2009). The issue collected seven articles that attempted to map the complex relationship between radical right populism and gender. A second Special Issue was published in *Gender and Education* (Miller-Idriss and Pilkington 2017). As points of departure, the authors took the empirical findings that radical right populist parties seem to attract more women than men, with a strong underrepresentation of women among these forces (Mudde 2014, 10), whilst acknowledging that the women active in these parties are oftentimes overlooked by researchers (Blee and Deutch 2012, 1). The editors aimed to capture the changing relationship between radical right populism and gender, highlighting the educational implications this may have. A third such effort was

a Symposium published in *West European Politics* (Erzeel and Rashkova 2017). It collected four articles, which examined whether these political forces are still *Männerparteien* and aimed to map the role that gender plays in radical right populist politics in European democracies. More interdisciplinary in nature, the fourth Special Issue was published in *Signs* (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019). Instead of focusing exclusively on radical right populism, the editors argued that the ‘global Right is political and ideological, and it lends momentum to – though it is by no means synonymous with – recent populist movements. Its politics are deployed in diverse historical, economic, cultural and religious contexts. It emerges as a misogynist, racist, antifeminist attack in online social networks [. . .]; it is articulated in the antigender ideologies of the Vatican [. . .]’ (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019, 542). Published most recently, the edited volume *Right-Wing Populism and Gender* includes 14 chapters dealing with what the editors define as the right-wing populist ‘obsession with gender and sexuality’ (Dietze and Roth 2020, 7). The book focuses on the right-wing populist ‘complex’, which includes political actors as well as media discourses, narratives and forms of action. The volume explores the intersections of right-wing populism with race, religion, class, and emotions. It also analyses the reasons for the success of ‘gender’ in right-wing populist meta-politics as an affective bridge or glue. Several chapters focus specifically on how Catholicism and religious fundamentalism are articulated in relation to gender.

In contrast, to date, there are rather few explicit analyses of the relationship between radical right populism and religion. One notable example is the Special Issue published in *Religion, State & Society* (DeHanas and Shterin 2018). Acknowledging the scarcity of such analyses, the issue takes its point of departure from an edited volume that made an early attempt at such analysis (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016) and identifies a conceptual exploration of Christianity as an important factor in the civilizational politics of populism (Brubaker 2017). The editors argued that religion plays a preponderantly identitarian and negative role in radical right populism in the sense of identifying what distinguishes Western ‘civilized’ societies from ‘barbaric’ Muslims. They maintained that ‘populist politicians evoke a reinvented Christian past to warn about the existential threat of its loss in the face of invading Muslims robbing it from the present. “The people” therefore must expel these Muslims from the nation’s future to guarantee its survival’ (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 178). The editors noted however that outside the Western world, it is ‘secularists’, ‘communists’ and Westerners themselves who constitute the antithetical category of ‘others’ who threaten the livelihood and cultural heritage of ‘the people’. This Special Issue collects six articles. Finally, the edited volume, which is the third instalment in a series dealing with *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, makes explicit its interest in matters pertaining to ‘migration, gender, and religion’ (Fitzi, Mackert, and

Turner 2019). The volume collects an introduction and 10 chapters, which examine the three articulations of populism and migration, populism and gender, respectively, populism and religion. Their starting point is acknowledging the demographic context in the Western world. The declining fertility rates and ageing native populations become a source of anxiety which is exploited by populist actors to articulate the presence of the (Muslim) migrant other as a threat, both through their alleged uncontrolled fertility and the risk they may represent to the safety and autonomy of the women part of the ethnic majority populations. As such, gender is positioned centrally in the populist ideological universe, but combines seemingly contradictory positions. This ideological universe generally embraces misogyny and anti-feminist attitudes fiercely opposing gender equality endeavours. The preoccupation with women's presence and autonomy in the public eye mirrors a developing crisis of masculinity, enmeshed with growing unemployment and uncertain or declining social status. Religion becomes important in this context, as the family and traditional motherhood are seen as essential to the reproduction of both nation and religion. Consequently, Christendom is identified as the ultimate line of defence against Islam for both the nation and the entire Western civilization.

Overview of the present special issue

With this critical mapping of the field in mind, we consider that a Special Issue disentangling radical right populism, gender, and religion is a timely academic endeavour. To begin, a few conceptual clarifications are necessary. We adopt an ideational understanding of radical right populism (Mudde 2007, 2014; Norocel 2013; Pirro 2015), whereby its key tenets are:

- strong nativism, which combines ethnic nationalism with either coded or more overt xenophobia;
- authoritarianism and social conservatism with economic protectionist undertones; and
- a Manichaean opposition between a sovereign and unitary people, often narrowly fitting the boundaries of national ethnic majorities, and a corrupt elite, removed from popular needs and representing the forces of globalization.

By adopting such a focused definition, we emphasize the role played by ideology in the articulation and understanding of populist politics. Of interest to us is how populism as a thin ideology (Stanley 2008) is juxtaposed with a radical understanding of social conservatism. Consequently, we do not consider populism as a mere discursive style, which is manifest through a specific communication manner that hinges on the distinction between

elites and 'the people', whom these parties claim to represent (Moffitt 2016). Neither do we treat it as a political project with a variable ideological anchoring (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2019).

This notwithstanding, we argue it is critically necessary to add a gender lens to such theorization. In this manner, we can account for the gendered conceptions of power, collective agency and subjectivity at work in radical right populism (for a detailed critique see, Maiguashca 2019). Concomitantly, we argue in this Special Issue that a stricter understanding of the 'global Right' as radical right populism does not preclude identifying the deployment of fear, violence, and threats in gendered constructions opposing women's and LGBTQ+ rights (for analyses of the European contexts, see Kantola and Lombardo 2019; Keskinen 2013; Norocel 2013, 2017; Norocel et al. 2020; Wodak 2015). These gendered constructions 'are invariably directed at purging women of sexual agency, degrading sexual diversity, banishing overt expressions of sexuality, and asserting particularly muscular and virile forms of masculinity' (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019, 545). Following this line of reasoning, we argue that particularly radical right populist political forces have played a key role in elevating the discussion about 'family values' to the top of the political agenda. They have even succeeded in enlisting themselves as fighters against a progressive agenda of both women, under the guise of 'femonationalism' (Farris 2017), and LGBTQ+ community representatives, conceptualized as 'homonationalism' (Puar 2007).

We factor in the religious aspect as the elevation of the 'sovereign people' to a sacred status, whereby the sacred is understood as 'what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over meaning and conduct of social life' (Lynch 2012, 29) rather than in conventional sense. This status is underpinned by people's alleged moral righteousness and purity, which places them in a position of superiority towards their 'others', be they corrupt elites, (Muslim) migrants or sexual minorities (such as the LGBTQ+ community). Their sacred status also justifies the array of instruments designed by radical right populist forces to 'save the people' no matter how violent (symbolically or physically) these instruments may be (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 180). Furthermore, the unitary aspect of the 'people' enables the polarizing activation of a 'parochial altruism' (in-group solidarity – out-group enmity) underpinned by a 'static religion' to stabilize social order. These elements feed on the Manichaeic 'us versus them' formula and encourage references to people's 'religious traditions to strengthen nationalism and other types of cultural separations' (Palaver 2019, 23–24). In exploring the role of religion in the populist discourse, scholars point out that cultural Christianity – Christian religious symbols, heritage, or roots – has been discursively mobilized to differentiate 'natives' from 'immigrants' in a national, European, or Western perspective (Brubaker 2017; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016).

An important factor in this context is ‘the politics of fear’ (Wodak 2015), which the radical right populist forces resort to, and which have a clear gendered aspect, and manifest through two interconnected processes. On the one hand, they are scapegoating foreign ‘others’, accused of being a source of fear themselves as potential rapists of ‘people’s women’, or endangering people’s moral unity. On the other hand, they exacerbate the fear of potential extinction, by stoking fears of a ‘demographic race’ resulting in the replacement of the native ethnic and religious majority (Norocel 2013).

With this in mind, in this Special Issue, we have collected seven articles, which provide useful insights on the interplay between radical right populism, gender and religion both from comparative perspectives (Norocel and Pettersson 2022; Öztürk, Serdar, and Giritli Nygren 2022) and in single country case studies (Giorgi 2022; Martinez 2022; Sauer 2022; Tranfić 2022). Although these articles are preponderantly focused on the Global North, there is one article exclusively examining a case study from the Global South (Martinez 2022), and another one analysing a digital community at large (Dickey, Spierings, and van Klinger 2022).

The first contribution examines how gender and religion are employed for ideological purposes in the discourses of radical right populist parties in Sweden and Finland (Norocel and Pettersson 2022). The analysis is anchored in the complexity of these societies as paragons of social welfare and gender equality, with Lutheran Christianity discreetly underpinning their largely secularized character. It unveils how appeals to gender equality strengthen and legitimize the separation between ‘the people’ and racialized Others. References to religion rank the racialized Others as ‘less than’ the secular and modern ‘people’, and oppose alleged inquisitorial attempts from their political opponents. The second contribution explores the discourse of the radical right populist Freedom Party of Austria in relation to female Muslim body-covering (Sauer 2022). It explores the intersections between a biopolitical discourse, focusing on the ‘Austrian people’ and the female body, and a necropolitical discourse that constructs migrants as non-belonging, excludable and erasable. Boundary work combines gender and religion in disciplining the religious and secular gendered bodies and constructing other religious bodies as disposable. In contrast to previous articles, the third contribution focuses on the role of the Catholic Church in articulating populist discourse by analysing the case of Croatia (Tranfić 2022). Bringing ‘gender ideology’ to the populist master frame, in some cases including locally relevant argumentation strategies based on anti-communist and nationalist themes, the Catholic Church manages to articulate traditionalist stances on morality policies, and can be analysed as an influential source of the populist master frame. Focusing on religious agency, the contribution helps improve theories rooted in secular politics, which neglect churches as important sources of populist mobilization. The fourth contribution combines political

and cultural sociology to explore the heuristic limitation of the frame of populists' 'instrumentalization of religion' in a post-secular context in which the criticisms against the clergy and the transformations of religious authorities are in fact broader trends characterizing contemporary Christianity (Giorgi 2022). By focusing on the Instagram comments and discussions among the followers of Matteo Salvini, the League's chair, the contribution analyses how populists react and respond to the accusation of instrumentalization of religion and whether and how gender is discursively mobilized in relation to religion. The fifth article focuses on Damares Alves, Brazil's Minister of Women, Family, and Human Rights, showing how she contributed to building the gender narrative in Bolsonaro's political project (Martinez 2022). It analyses the articulation of religion and gender in Brazilian populism. The study explores Alves's discursive strategies to attack feminism, and to legitimize herself and Bolsonaro's political project as pro-women. The sixth contribution brings us to the Reddit digital environment (Dickey, Spierings, and van Klinger 2022). It examines a homonationalist subreddit to explore how gender and religion are activated to construct the boundaries between LGBT right-wing identities and other religious, or LGBTQ+ outgroups. The final contribution analyses comparatively radical right-wing parties' interventions into the veil debate, by exploring the intersections of gender and religion in Turkey, Sweden, and France (Öztürk, Serdar, and Giritli Nygren 2022). Although characterized by different understandings of legal and normative secularism, findings show that these parties capitalize on gender, religiosity, and secularity. The veil is exploited in drawing boundaries between both the 'People' and 'non-People', and the 'People' and the 'Elites'. In this way, the meanings attributed to the veil are used as a mechanism of exclusion and of drawing the boundaries through gendered narratives of who belongs to the 'People'.

Overall, these articles provide the first in-depth and comparative understanding of the entanglements of gender and religion in radical right populist ideology, explore the active role of religion in the populist discourse, and invite to combine the analysis of the political sphere with the analysis of occurrences in the broader society. Moreover, they show the relevance of adopting gender lenses to analyse populism. To conclude, when we embarked on this project, we were aware of the high standards of intellectual rigour in the effort of challenging oppression and fighting racism and inequalities. During the years, *Identities* has published much needed Special Issues, which have either interrogated 'the contemporary provenance of racist "populist" nationalism' (Meer 2019, 502) or have vigorously questioned the reification of certain identities along such categories as gender, race, and locality in order to challenge oppression and inequities (Glick Schiller 1998, 297). Many stand-alone articles also testify to the ongoing debate on populism taking place in *Identities* (Mondon and Winter 2019; Norocel 2016; Soare

and Tufiş 2021; Thorleifsson 2021). We can only hope that the readers will consider the contributions reunited in this Special Issue just as committed to advancing knowledge on these pressing issues.

Notes

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/20/brazil-jair-bolsonaro-homophobic-outburst-corruption-scandal>
2. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/orlando-is-pushing-lgbt-rights-and-immigration-towards-coli#.saA37YW1n1>
3. <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-europe/2019/05/italys-catholic-establishment-faults-salvini-for-rosary/>
4. <https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/20/salvini-kisses-rosary-after-conte-criticism-over-religious-symbols>
5. <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/avsnitt/566,690?programid=3227>

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