

BOOK REVIEW

***The Gendered Politics of Crisis and De-Democratization: Opposition to Gender Equality.* Edited by Bianka Vida.
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In *The Gendered Politics of Crisis and De-Democratization*, Bianka Vida and her coauthors offer an interdisciplinary analysis of the recent rise of opposition against gender+ and LGBTQIA+ equality in the multilevel space of the European Union (EU) (and Turkey). The book is thus part of a burgeoning body of scholarship in the field of gender and politics that has begun to address such opposition from an explicitly feminist perspective (Dietze and Roth 2020; Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Köttig, Bitzan, and Pető 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Möser, Ramme, and Takács 2022; Roggeband and Krizsán 2018; Verloo 2018; Verloo and Paternotte 2018). And yet, this book advances such scholarship in important ways: first, by broadening its focus in order to locate current opposition against gender+ and LGBTQIA+ equality within the context of the specifically gendered effects of current de-democratization processes and the 2008 economic crisis, crucially, as these intersect with the role of the EU as a gendered normative power; and second, by deepening that focus to assess the effects of opposition in terms of policy reversals and changes in prevailing gender regimes at both the EU and national levels, as well as feminist responses to these.

A central argument traversing the theoretical framework and nine case studies that form this edited volume is that current opposition against gender+ and LGBTQIA+ equality in Europe is both a cause and an effect of democratic backsliding (3). In Chapter 5, in particular, Judith Goetz and Stefanie Mayer explore the current anti-feminism hype in Austria, highlighting the correlation between the anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian views of right-wing extremism. Both, they argue, are premised on the biological determinism of purportedly natural heteronormative gender relations (95) and legitimize not only a patriarchal but also an ethnicized worldview (104). In Chapter 8, in turn, Vida analyzes the relationship between challenges to democracy and to gender+ equality in Hungary. She argues that, since the mid-2010s, Hungary has become a polypore state, one that “uses the tools of democracy to further weaken an already-weak

democracy with parallel erosion of gender+ equality” (156). Key in this regard was the use of constitutional amendments aimed at institutionalizing traditional family values and the dismantling of gender equality institutions, along with the economic suffocation of critical civil society organizations and their replacement with government-sponsored ones (166).

Another key argument developed throughout the book is that the 2008 economic crisis, and especially the EU’s response to it through neoliberal and gender-blind austerity politics, created a breeding ground for opposition against gender+ and LGBTQIA+ equality. As Vida argues in the introduction, such response contributed to de-democratize the entire region by shifting decision-making power from national democratic institutions to bureaucratic ones at the EU level. Moreover, it reinforced conservative views on women’s social roles as well as nationalistic politics, often expressed in the form of Euroskepticism (7). Indeed, in Chapter 7 Elisa Bellè and Alessia Donà show how a virulent anti-Europeanism espoused against the EU’s bureaucracy and austerity policies assisted the anti-gender discourse of the Italian right-wing populist party Lega as it rose to power in the mid-2010s (139). In Chapter 9, in turn, Martijn Mos suggests that despite the key role of the EU in extending LGBT rights through its accession process, it can hardly prevent a backlash against such rights and the EU itself after accession, as shown by the case of the opposition to Lithuania’s “gay propaganda” Law on Minors of 2009.

Preceding these arguments, Akaysha Humniski and Ginger Feather, in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, reflect on the EU’s own gender equality regime, showing how its intrinsically (neo)liberal character—which only intensified in the aftermath of the economic crisis—limits its progress in practice, rendering its role as a *gendered normative power* more a myth than a reality, both internally and externally. Relatedly, in Chapter 10, Anikò Gregor reflects on the intersection between neoliberalism and gender equality through an analysis of the biopolitical roots of the concept of gender and its impact on gender studies.

Shifting from the causes to the effects of current opposition against gender+ and LGBTQIA+ equality, the book illustrates its impact in the form of actual policy reversals, with direct repercussions for the prevailing gender regimes at the national level. In Chapter 6, for example, Serem Ertan analyzes the changes in Turkey’s gender regime following the rise of opposition against gender+ equality in the mid-2010s, headed by an increasingly conservative, anti-democratic, and populist Justice and Development Party (AKP). She shows how Turkey’s former social democratic public gender regime—forged under pressure from the EU accession agenda and a strong women’s movement—transitioned to an unequal gender justice regime that combined neoliberal and conservative values through the concomitant promotion of economic growth and pro-family policies, in the context of an explicit de-Europeanization (121). Vida and Barbara Gaweda make similar arguments in their chapters on Hungary and Poland, respectively.

Finally, the book devotes unprecedented attention to the feminist responses against such opposition. In Chapter 11, in particular, Gaweda analyzes the resistance of feminist activists and academics to the government’s attack on sexual and reproductive health and rights in Poland since the mid-2010s, while

Bellè and Donà do the same in Chapter 7, in relation to various anti-gender and LGBTQIA+ equality bills presented in Italy during the same period.

All of these elements address critical gaps in the recent literature on opposition against gender+ and LGBTQIA+ equality in Europe. And yet, they fall short in key respects. For example, while the unprecedented focus on the role of the EU is highly welcomed, it is surprising that the emergence of opposition against gender+ and LGBTQIA+ equality within its own institutions is not addressed. As such, the analysis of the relation between opposition and the EU's role as a gendered normative power always remains mediated by the national level. In addition, the book is permeated by an uncritical association of gender equality with democracy, and, in turn, a dissociation with neoliberalism, that fails to address how feminism can operate alongside neoliberalism to the detriment of democracy. While some reflection in this regard can be found in Gregor's chapter, it is far from mainstreamed throughout the book. The same can be said of the feminist responses against opposition, which are addressed directly only in one chapter and tangentially in another. Finally, the book offers much more attention to gender+ than LGBTQIA+ equality and tends to treat both as coterminous. It is to the book's credit, however, that these shortcomings indicate nothing more than future avenues for research.

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