



Populism Unveiled: (Femo)Nationalism and the gendered side of the Other

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This paper discusses the nature of what I term contemporary "Femonationalism", namely, the mobilisation of the notion of gender equality against Islam both by nationalist parties and by feminist intellectuals, particularly in three countries: Italy, France and the Netherlands.

By analysing recent theoretical and empirical studies of nationalism and populism in the three main countries under discussion, I suggest that the label of populism, which has been used to describe the new-right across Europe in recent years, risks being misleading unless the defining elements of this political phenomenon are brought to the forefront: namely, its nationalist dimensions. Although the theoretical debate on populism has produced important insights into the nature of contemporary Femonationalism, a central thesis of this paper is that the dichotomising strategy of the "us" against "them" of populist parties cannot be fruitfully analysed simply by means of a formal logic as suggested, for instance, by Ernesto Laclau in 'On Populist Reason'. Rather, I argue that the "us" mobilised by contemporary populist forces is not a shapeless demos but, rather, a specific ethnos or natio. Populist organisations therefore need to be analysed in terms of their reformulation of nationalist perspectives.

This theoretical clarification is particularly important in order to understand the current mobilisation of gender by nationalist-populist movements in Europe. While I draw upon post-colonial theory's complex articulation of the relation between women and nation in the non-Western world, particularly in the classic work of Nira Yuval-Davis, Kumari Jaywardena and Anne McClintock, among others, I will focus upon this relation more specifically in terms of the political articulation of the notion of the "nation" in contemporary Europe. I will discuss, first, how the myth of the defence of women has been historically one of the most important elements of all nationalisms. Second, I will analyse how, in order for nationalist ideologies to emphasise the integrity of the nation along ethnic lines, gender roles need to be strictly defined since women are identified as the guardians of tradition and the bearers of continuity. Finally, I will discuss how nationalist discourses' promotion of such "ethnic" perspectives requires women's bodies to be overpowered and regulated. By providing evidence of these themes drawn from a number of sources (governmental policy documents, recent laws on mixed-marriages in Italy and the Netherlands, and welfare benefits for increasing the birth rates of "national" women in Italy), this paper builds upon Michel Foucault's analysis, as developed in his 'History of Sexuality', of the control of women's bodies and reproductive strategies as a politically invested site and as the means through which "race" and nation are reproduced.