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Martial masculinity and authoritarian populism

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Thirty-three years after the fall of the Berlin wall, bloc-thinking is back. The democratic "West" against the authoritarian "East". Authoritarian alliances in the "West" recede into the backdrop, critique of liberal democracy's chronic shadows grow silent. States recently accused of threatening democracy and the rule of law are embraced. They belong once again to the democratic "We". With the war in Ukraine, authoritarianism in the "West" is externalized to the Putin regime. But authoritarian populism has been growing in Europe for a long time in the midst of liberal democracy, in states that claim to be illiberal, but not only there. The pandemic has intensified this neoliberal-authoritarian transformation. When uncertainties increase and bring about the compulsion to control, all sides take recourse to identitarianisms, as if there had never been a critique of it.

The war is a time of re-nationalization, a time in which unity is called for by all sides. But the pandemic already brought back Europe's internal borders and the management of numbers in national frames. In the fight against the pandemic, a re-familialization was observable in the traditional heteronormative sense.[1] Contrary to the argument that society is divided into a

group of the reasonable, observant of the pandemic regulations, and a group of those who refuse vaccination and appeal to freedom, what can be seen here is instead two lines of neoliberal society's increasing authoritarization, embedded in a new Biedermeier.[2] Of course, an authoritarian turn in the liberal-democratic part of Europe must be traced back at least to the European Union's austerity policies in the wake of the financial and economic crisis of 2007/08, and beyond that to the neoliberal dismantling and transformation of the welfare state that has taken place over the past two decades at least, and its individualizing interpellations of self-responsibility. Without wanting to construe any linearity of authoritarian development, I want to emphasize the accuracy and far-reaching insight of Stuart Hall's thought at the outset of neoliberal governance (i.e., at the end of the 1970s in the context of the Thatcher government) when he introduced the term "authoritarian populism" and described it as an aspect of the liberal-representative form of democracy.[3]

Authoritarian-populist and illiberal forces build on the constitutive inequalities and domination patterns of modern liberal democracy. One of the key aporias of liberal democracy is that democratization processes are able to occur without changing this form of democracy in its basic masculinist, bourgeois and exclusive form. Stuart Hall made clear that "authoritarian populism" does not emerge out of nothing. It has long continuities and renews itself from within the bourgeois center of the social order. Recurring means of authoritarian-populist mobilization are "moral panics", stoked by issues like security, migration and sexual liberalization.[4] Authoritarian populism directly targets freer forms of gender and sexuality regimes.

The doubleness of martial masculinity

In his televised statement against the "West" on February 24, 2022, the day of the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin announced, among other things: "Properly speaking, the attempts to use us in their own interests never ceased until quite recently: they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people, from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature."[5] The "false values" at stake here, which "erode" and "degenerate" "traditional values", are lesbian, gay and queer forms of life. For years now, Putin has cursed against everything that would challenge the "traditional values" of biological sex dualism and patriarchal heteronormativity. Together with the Russian Orthodox forces, the Putin regime has increasingly fought against homosexuality, trans persons and the LGBTIQ movement. The fear that non-heteronormative forms of life could weaken society, state and religion has continued to grow among Russian conservatives.[6] But Putin's use of transphobic and homophobic reasoning to justify the attack on Ukraine signals an entirely new dimension. Antiliberalism, authoritarian populism and the cult of the strong, heterosexual man melt together here to legitimize the war.[7]

A further reactionary element of this war is that it is being constituted in terms of biologistic, binary identities and the reactionary identity politics of authoritarian populism on both Russian and Ukrainian sides. Claims of a homogenous people, a fatherland, a nation necessarily require the unambiguousness of two genders: a masculinity that fights to death for the fatherland on the one hand and women responsible for the reproduction of the nation on the other. In Ukraine, women are the only ones allowed to flee along with the children and elderly. For everyone

without Ukrainian citizenship and for all those who are thought to not look European, escape and access to support are made difficult at the very least. The racism of the refugee and migration policies along the European borders is once again apparent. All Ukrainian men between 18 and 60 years of age must, according to the logic of reactionary patriarchal masculinity, remain in the country and fight, for the *patria*, for the fatherland. They are brutally restricted, prevented from crossing the national border, from leaving the war, from deserting, from evading from the war on national turf. Trans and nonbinary people who (still) have a masculine gender entry in their passport are forced by this mobilization of all "men" to survive in this binary, brutally reactionary masculinity. Even though lively queer milieus existed in Kiev and other places before the Russian attack, it is very difficult in Ukraine to change one's official gender, the process remaining tied to psychological reports and lacking sensitivity. Many transitions therefore take place "privately" and without medical guidance.[8] In war, this privacy becomes even more precarious, subject to the increasing sexualized violence of actively-fighting masculinity and barely livable. And yet it has been possible to organize safe spaces for fleeing queer and trans persons in several places in Ukraine.[9]

The figure of the authoritarian masculinist leader embodied in Vladimir Putin is only the tip of this martial-masculinist identitarianism construed and carried out in the name of a supposedly unified national "people". Volodymyr Zelensky is stylized as the opposing figure, assuming the intended role of the "tragic hero": the comedian elected President of Ukraine was required by Russia's war of aggression to make "violence into a necessary evil".[10] Zelensky's portrayal of masculinity depicts him as heroic, humble, vulnerable and demanding. Putin, on the other hand, is the cold or crazy monster. David against Goliath — the

doubleness of martial masculinity. The masculinity celebrated around Zelensky is no less extensively characterized by militarism, precisely insofar as the latter repeatedly demands not only the delivery of weapons but also a NATO intervention in his many livestreamed appearances in national parliaments and at the UN assembly. In so doing he is consciously advancing militarization in the EU and at the same time persistently hazarding — at least rhetorically — another world war. To understand this return of heroic martial masculinity as an apparent symptom of failed global security policy, insofar as the "West" is not intervening militarily and Ukrainian men are left alone to defend their country,[11] is to spectacularly underestimate the multi-dimensional expansion of authoritarian populism, which is able to assert patriarchal, violent, heteronormative masculinity once again as the "new normal" of a nation fit for war.

The EU and the so-called "West" are now once again constituting themselves along the lines of a homogenizing identitarianism, which the portrayal of unity and agreement within the EU and together with the United States is supposed to establish. Illiberal positions are being integrated, belonging once more to the liberal "West" which professes yet again to defend its identitarian "values" in unity. Ruling this militarized "turning point in history" (or *Zeitenwende*, the term used by the German federal government) is the unity diktat of collective sovereignization, to be established and secured not least through independence from the energy and supply chain of Russian gas. The "Western" desire for autonomy and independence (in spring 2022 gas is still being delivered to Germany from Russia) is not simply nationalistic; it is the expression of protectionist bloc-thinking.

Embedded in authoritarian populistic contexts, a martial bloc-sovereignization of the "West" will come at the cost of multiplicity

of all kinds, even in places that consider themselves liberal, and it will create points of connection to the reactionary, exclusive identity constructs that reject not only gender parity but also social equality in general.[12] Ecological transformation is also left without a place in wartime. The phasing out of coal is being postponed, atomic energy is being greenwashed. The extreme rise in armament costs and the fiscal debts they entail will also lead to additional cuts and rollbacks in social welfare and healthcare and will further exacerbate inequalities and precarization.[13]

For some time now, a key argument of "Western" authoritarian populism has been that antiracism, the critique of colonialism and the manifold breaking-open of patriarchal binary gender norms weaken and hollow out liberal democracy and erode patriarchal-masculinist self-esteem. Leftist "identity politics" were accused of having given Putin reasons for a war of aggression.[14] That the war will bring with it the revival of a brutal patriarchal masculinization is welcomed in hopes that dominating superiority can once again be demonstrated vis-à-vis the uncivilized and the monsters. Critique of liberal democracy and the demand for equality and freedom for manifold ways of life are stances considered, at best, appropriate for times of peace.

The identity of "the people" and "Western values"

This is where it becomes fundamentally apparent that the rise of authoritarian-populist discourses and illiberal politics is not about a negation or an Other of liberal democracy, but about a renewed intensification of the constitutive inequalities, especially gender inequality and sexism, of this form of democracy in capitalist societies.[15] Gender and sexuality are not just topics or content fueling rightwing mobilization. The propagation of a "natural"

gender difference goes hand in hand in authoritarian-populist discourse with a (re)traditionalization of patriarchal-heteronormative gender relations. At the same time, the biologistic-naturalized notion of gender further entrenches the social inequalities in mainstream society upon which the stabilization of a reformulated hegemonic masculinity is predicated. [16] This kind of superiority-based masculinity is inseparable from the nationalistic refiguration of whiteness, which in the reformulation of a biopolitical racism stemming from the nineteenth century facilitates the interpellation of a "healthy", "pure", "white" "people" via questions of "gender", "family", "identity".[17]

This identitarian, ethnicized "people" is naturalized as pre-political. Based on the discursive antagonism between "them" and "us", or "the elites" versus "the people", authoritarian populism claims to create an identity with the "true people". In the ideological bloc of the "West", identitarian "Western values" are substituted for the people of the nation, while the identity logic remains the same.

The neoliberal authoritarian turn is supported primarily by identitarian and authenticity discourses, and thus representation culminates ideally in the figure of a masculinist leader. Discursive strategies about the identity of "the people" maintain the representative form of democracy and suggest solutions for its crisis. Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, these ideas of identitarian pureness have been unified with fantasies held by many of an unscathed, uncontaminated body, of individualized freedom and self-determination, and as such they have found broad resonance among '*Querdenker*innen*' and anti-vaxxer movements.

The "people" constituted in identitarian terms have long opposed not only "political elites" and migrants. So-called "genderists" and

feminists, LGBTI* and human rights activists are marked as "enemies of the people", because they refuse reproduction in the spirit of the patriarchal-racialized fortification of the nation. The worldwide political movement against same-sex marriage, abortion rights and "political correctness", itself totally contradictory, has been repeatedly enflamed by the Vatican, which invented and successfully spread the terminology of "gender ideology".[18] The anti-gender discourse that reaches far into the liberal bourgeoisie simultaneously enables the perspective that violence against women, queer and trans persons in public is a matter of individual transgressions or acts traceable to "relationship issues" in the private sphere, and it structurally externalizes such violence as effects of an unenlightened patriarchy of the "Other".[19]

Forms of life against the interval of liberalism and authoritarian populism

After several decades of sedimenting individualistic and individualizing neoliberal conditions, the question increasingly comes up as to how vulnerabilities and precariousness can be problematized beyond identity constructions, and how they can be thought and politicized amidst non-deceptive, mutual connections and affections. What does it mean to cling to identity when even a reactionary masculinist identitarian war can be fought against queer forms of life under this flag? In times of renationalization, of the renewed conjuncture of popular sovereignty, bloc affinities and citizenship-based migration policies that are deeply racist, there can be no such thing as a leftist identity politics. If we want to understand democracy in a fundamentally different way — without the nation, without the people, without bloc thinking — we must stop approving of identity constructions and — to put it in Foucault's terms — affirm what we can *become* in the present

without identity attachments, how we can become different, how we can *de-subjectivize* ourselves.[20]

This means to continue taking struggles as the starting point and refreshing the ways in which this is done. It means refusal and desertion, rejecting the impositions and injuries of existing conditions of domination and sustainably breaking them open and transforming them. Identity politics and its corresponding forms of organization are not up to this task. Practices of evading mean strategically departing, deserting not only war but also the prevailing neo/liberal-democratic conditions, practices of improvisation and invention, practices that can be seen in common struggles. Starting from struggles against racism makes it possible to grasp (re)formations of racism through migrant-defined resistance rather than through positionings produced by racism and mistaken for identities.[21] In the transnational queer-feminist struggles against violence inflicted on feminized bodies, what is held in common does not emerge through identities but through connected experiences and the "situated and transversal questioning of violence," as Verónica Gago and others have made clear with respect to the *Ni Una Menos* movement in Latin America.[22] To focus on mutual dependencies and relationships of care is to dismantle the patriarchal-masculinist and colonizing figure of the autonomous subject independent of others that exploits the devalued and feminized care and reproductive labor in the heteronormative family model. To take non-morally-connoted relationships of indebted care as the starting point is not to deny the ambivalences of care between power, support and violence. This kind of perspective corresponds to a radical inclusion of all nonbinary practices of care that underscore mutual dependencies.[23] When we take indebted care practices as our starting point, we live in the undercommons, incapable of sovereignty, in mutual

care. “The undercommons is the refusal of the interpersonal, and by extension the international, upon which politics is built. To be undercommon is to live incomplete in the service of a shared incompletion, which acknowledges and insists upon the inoperative condition of the individual and the nation as these brutal and unsustainable fantasies and all of the material effects they generate oscillate in the ever-foreshortening interval between liberalism and fascism.”[24] Beyond this interval of authoritarian populism, being situated in care makes de-subjectivation possible, not as deprivation but as new modes of subjectivation that emerge through affection of and with surrounding bodies and things. Against militarization, armament and martial masculinities, it is possible to experiment with a democracy of care that affirms and expands beyond all borders the heterogeneity of the multitude. Not the people, not sovereignty, not the nation.

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[1] Cf. Mike Laufenberg, Susanne Schultz, „The Pandemic State of Care: Care Familialism and Care Nationalism in the COVID-19-Crisis. The Case of Germany”, *Historical Social Research* 4 (2021), 72-99.

[2] Cf. Isabell Lorey, “„Corona Effects: After Prevention, Just In Time: Digitalization and Contact Phobias”, in Isabella Kohlhuber, Oliver Leistert (Eds.), *Hamburg Maschine revisited: Artistic and Critical Investigations into Our Digital Condition*, Hamburg: Adocs 2022.

[3] Stuart Hall, “Popular-Democratic vs Authoritarian Populism”, in Alan Hunt (ed.), *Marxism and Democracy*, London 1980, 157–180. For an actualization, see also Alex Demirović, “Autoritärer

Populismus als neoliberale Krisenbewältigungsstrategie," *PROKLA. Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft 190*, 48:1 (2018), 27–42.

[4] Stuart Hall, „Authoritarian Populism: A Reply to Jessop et al.," *New Left Review 151*, 26:3 (1985), 115–124, here 116.

[5] Putin's address cited in the German original of this text from Deniz Yücel, "Hass auf Homosexuelle. Die radikalen Putin-Sätze, die zu wenig Beachtung gefunden haben", *Die Welt*, 28 February 2022, https://www.welt.de/kultur/plus237198075/Putin-und-die-Entartung-Kriegsgrund-Schwulenhass.html (An English translation of Putin's address is available at: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24)

[6] An obvious symptom is the law against "homosexual propaganda" passed in 2013, which resulted in a rise in discrimination and hate crimes against LGTB persons. LBTB events and projects have since been banned under the pretext of child protection (and the accusation of "pedophilia"). (Cf. among others Razhana Buyantueva, "LGBT-Bewegung und Homophobie in Russland", *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, online 19 Februar 2018, https://www.bpb.de/themen/europa/russland-analysen/264904/analyse-lgbt-bewegung-und-homophobie-in-russland/; "Die Situation von LGBT in Russland", *Deutsches Institut für Sozialwirtschaft*, 22 March 2021, https://echte-vielfalt.de/lebensbereiche/lsbtiq/die-situation-von-lgbt-in-russland/).

[7] On this amalgam, see also Yücel, "Hass auf Homosexuelle".

[8] Cf. Muri Darida, "Trans Menschen in der Ukraine. Kein Mann und trotzdem zum Bleiben gezwungen", *Zeit-online /ze.tt*, 15

March 2022, https://www.zeit.de/zett/queeres-leben/2022-03/trans-menschen-ukraine-militaer-mann.

[9] The human rights activist Maryna Shevtsova of the University of Ljubljana (https://marynashevtsova.com/) writes that these safe spaces are in urgent need of support: money, hormones, shampoo, tampons, which activists should bring to countries bordering the Ukraine such as Slovakia so that they may be transported to Ukrainian shelters (see also Darida, "Trans Menschen in der Ukraine", https://www.zeit.de/zett/queeres-leben/2022-03/trans-menschen-ukraine-militaer-mann).

[10] Jagoda Marinić, "Männlich", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 25 March 2022; see also Annalisa Merelli, "Man of the hour: The redefinition of masculinity is playing out in the fight between Zelensky and Putin", *Quartz*, 8 March 2022, https://qz.com/2135829/why-the-world-likes-volodymyr-zelenskyy/.

[11] Marinić, "Männlich".

[12] Cf. Birgit Sauer, "Authoritarian Right-Wing Populism as Masculinist Identity Politics. The Role of Affects," in Gabriele Dietze, Julia Roth (eds), *Right-Wing Populism and gender. European Perspectives and Beyond*, Bielefeld 2020, 25–44.

[13] Cf. "#Der Appell": "Preserving Democracy and the Welfare State. No Armament in the Basic Law!", which tens of thousands of people in Germany have signed in a very short time (https://derappell.de/en/).

[14] In this regard, see the perspective of the US-based conservative Italian journalist Federico Rampini, "Perché l'Occidente è arrivato impreparato all'invasione di Putin?" ("Why was the West unprepared for Putin's invasion?"), *Corriere della sera*,

9 March 2022, https://www.corriere.it/politica/22_marzo_09/putin-sottovalutato-democrazie-4f53849a-9f1a-11ec-937a-aba34929853f.shtml.

[15] Cf. Birgit Sauer, "Demokratie, Volk, Geschlecht. Radikaler Rechtspopulismus in Europa", in Katharina Pühl, Birgit Sauer (eds.), *Kapitalismuskritische Gesellschaftsanalyse. Queer-feministische Positionen*, Münster 2018, 178-195.

[16] Cf. among others Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur, Suzanna Danuta Walters, "Introduction. Gender and the Rise of the Global Right", *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3 (2019), 541-560.

[17] Cf. Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, New York 2003.

[18] Already in 2001, Pope Johannes Paul II spoke of "specific ideologies of 'gender'" (Elizabeth S. Corredor, "Unpacking 'Gender Ideology'
and the Global Right's Anti-Gender Countermovement", *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44:3 (2019), 613–638, here 615; see also Mary Anne Case, "Trans Formations in the Vatican's War on 'Gender Ideology'", ibid., 639–664). Pope Francis spoke firmly on a "Gender Ideology" in his *Encyclical Letter. Laudato Si of the Holy Father Francis – On Care of for Common Home*, May 24, 2015, para 155, vatican.va. – In his speech before Polish bishops in the context of World Youth Day in Krakow in 2016, he called for the rescue of humanity from gender ideology. In March 2019, the Vatican's UN representative, Filipino Archbishop Bernardito Auza, further escalated the "danger" of "gender ideology" in his talk in New York, as a "threat for the future", primarily, that of the children, and as a "step back for humanity" (see Salvatore Cernuzio,

“The Holy See Against Gender Ideology: A Danger to Humanity. Sex is Not a Subjective Choice”, *La Stampa*, March 22, 2019). This campaign was taken up by many right-wing extreme politicians with and without connections to the Catholic church.

[19] On femicides in a European comparison in 2017, see europeandatajournalism.eu. – Deadly violence against trans*women does not appear in any police statistics. All of these femicides are political murders and not crimes in the private sphere.

[20] Cf. Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx. Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, New York 1991, 46-47.

[21] Cf. Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson, Vassilis Tsianos, *Escape Routes. Control and Subversion in the 21st Century*, London: Pluto Press 2008.

[22] Verónica Gago, *Feminist International. How to Change Everything*, London: Verso 2020.

[23] Cf. in detail Isabell Lorey, *Democracy in the Political Present. A Queer-feminist Theory*, London: Verso 2022.

[24] Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, *All Incomplete*, London: Minor Compositions 2021, p. 122.