

THE QUEST FOR THE “NORMAL” FAMILY

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Politics is increasingly a public oratory game aimed at blurring, confusing and manipulating the meaning of words and concepts in order to gain popularity, rather than to communicate any kind of truth. For literary and cultural theorists, politics feels like a constant voyage through Arthur Schopenhauer’s manual of rhetoric.

In contemporary politics, the surprising element in these games is that despite the —virtual and real— all-pervasive media presence and the unprecedented level of social education in the Western world, it seems as easy as ever to lie to the public. One example of such a blunt and open, yet blindly accepted, lie was information during the Brexit campaign about how much the UK spends on the EU on a weekly basis and the promise that this money would be spent on the NHS (which was denied on the morning after the referendum in June 2016 by Nigel Farage, the leader of the Brexit movement).

There are more sophisticated and more difficult to counteract lies in political rhetoric: one example is the main theme of this article, namely the manipulation of the concept of gender by right-wing, predominantly PiS, politicians in Poland. Such manipulation has helped in establishing traditional, family-orientated politics, based on another blurred concept of normality. Gender, connected to LG-BTIQ movements, has been set up as opposed to “normal” human beings and constructed as a social threat.

Here I sketch the contemporary Polish political debate related to broadly understood “body politics,” giving special attention to language—manipulating, disturbing, sometimes changing completely—and shamelessly utilizing concepts to win arguments. Two phenomena are at the core of this article: the debate on abortion,

which appeared in March 2016 with the conservative proposition to restrict the already restrictive anti-abortion law, and the debate on gender and its connection to family politics and sexual education.

**MONSTROUS GENDER:
“FEMINIST” LANGUAGE VERSUS IDEOLOGICAL MANIPULATION**

One could perhaps ask how is it possible that gender (as a concept, as a phenomenon, or its existence) can be denied, negated, or rejected? I am not only referring to the recent debate between the Polish Catholic Church and the political response to its reflections on gender (mainly in 2013 and 2014)¹, but also to the general audience, often educated people who are confused about the very notion.

So, why is it like this? Gender as an idea—however popular in the scientific and academic context—is difficult to capture in everyday usage: gender is there. Gender is obtained, inscribed, practiced, exercised but not talked about. The discussion on gender tends to be masqueraded by other terms, such as obligation, duty, masculinity, parenting, mother, womanhood, and many other things. This two-fold semantic and pragmatic dimension of gender causes controversies not only in the Polish context but generally. In the Polish case, as it is a case in many other languages (Russian, Czech, Spanish etc.), gender as a word has never been translated and functions in the English form (in Polish not even transliterated), which only adds to its vagueness in common use. I argue that gender in many contemporary languages and cultures functions in its double dimension: as an “obvious” academic concept (where the question of its existence is incontestable); and in its “opaque” dimension—it appears to be absent from the broader educational spheres (schools, teachers’ training, developing professional skills workshops), and as such it continues to be obscure and subject to political manipulation.

¹ The recent book by Maciej Duda exemplifies and describes well the whole phenomenon of the language manipulation in the church, politics, and sometime academic debates. Maciej Duda, *Dogmat płci. Polska wojna z gender* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2016).

The “incontestable” character of gender is a consequence of the scholarship of particular disciplines, namely feminist studies, then gender studies, and LGBTQ studies. In Poland, gender as term appeared in the 1990s, primarily in literary studies, but also in political and social studies.² In recent years, there have appeared many publications summarizing the last two decades of the presence of feminist thought in the Polish Academy, such as the *Encyclopedia of Gender* (*Encyclopedia gender: płeć w kulturze*, 2014).³ Yet, gender as a concept with its complicated semantic field as well as particular character in its usage, causes many misunderstandings, despite scholarship devoted to its elaborations (starting from the classic texts such as those by Joan Scott, Judith Butler, and Toril Moi) to Polish publications (Nasiłowska, Iwasiów).⁴

Now, let us review the many confusions in Polish public discourse in 2013–14, which were also present since the autumn 2015 election when PiS again became the major political player in Polish politics.

THE CATALOGUE OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Gender is a concept “deeply destructive” to “the person, inter-human relations and all social life,” we read in the pastoral letter by Polish bishops attacking the “ideology of gender,” which was recited in all churches on December 29, 2013. In their letter, the bishops said the

² One of the chief publications was a huge collection of essays summarizing the previous decade on gender scholarship published in 2001: German Ritz, Magdalena Hornung, Jędrzejczak Marcin, and Tadeusz Korsak, *Ciało, płeć, literatura: prace ofiarowane Profesorowi Germanowi Ritzowi* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Wiedza Powszechna, 2001).

³ Rudaś, Grodzka, Monika et al., *Encyclopedia gender. Płeć w kulturze* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, 2014).

⁴ I refer here to the following texts: Joan Scott Wallach, *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1986) 46–61; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990); Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and the first Polish elaborations on gender, like Anna Nasiłowska, *Ciało I tekst. Feminizm w literaturoznawstwie*. (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2001). This book collected many essays that initiated the debate on feminism and gender within the magazine *Teksty Drugie* in 1993 and 1995). See also Inga Iwasiów, *Geder dla średniozaawansowanych* (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2004).

“ideology of gender” was “strongly rooted in Marxism and neo-Marxism” and had been promoted in Poland “for several months” by “vocal circles with considerable financial means” who wanted to “experiment on children.” The letter also states that “God created men and women—with the great and indispensable gift that, in body and spirit, they should be men for women and women for men, assigned to married life.” And further, “It must therefore arouse the greatest concern that an attempt is now being made to redefine marriage and family, especially by supporters of this ideology of gender.”

The letter caused great confusion. Many have thought the controversy was being stoked by simple misunderstandings. For example, Piotr Mucharski, chief editor of the Kraków-based Catholic weekly, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, said that “Gender Studies have been taught at Polish universities for years and no one until now has questioned this.”⁵ Then the Polish government’s Equal Rights Plenipotentiary, Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz, said that no programs spreading anti-family material existed in Polish schools and accused the bishops of inventing the term “gender ideology” as an “imagined enemy.” Meanwhile, a group of Warsaw-based professors said the Church’s new campaign risked “endangering freedom of research,” and another group wrote to the Pope, complaining that blaming gender studies as a source of family crisis was simply a “witch hunt.”

A heated public debate started, in which feminist and gender circles tended to take the accusation as a joke, while the Church and conservative circles (teachers, activists, some MPs) took the issue very seriously and—using the above mentioned language (gender ideology, Marxist connections, a destructive idea, genderism against the family etc.)—started a campaign in the media and organized protests, talks, and lectures.

Several prominent churchmen also questioned the bishops’ move. While reporting on the debate, the Catholic weekly, *Our Sunday Visitor* stressed that Catholic experts tended to be confused by the whole event: “A Jesuit editor, Father Jacek Prusak, said the pastoral letter appeared to have ‘distorted relations between religion and science,’ while

⁵ See Jonathan Luxmoore, “Polish Church Declares War on Gender Ideology,” *Our Sunday Visitor Newsweekly*, January 29, 2014.

a leading Dominican, Father Maciej Zięba, questioned the wisdom of denouncing ‘gender’ when most Poles had never heard the term.”⁶

The story of this “gender trouble” in the Polish Church goes back to 2012; at least this was suggested by the Polish Church’s Catholic Information Agency, KAI, in January 2014, stating that the Catholic Church worldwide had “unanimously rejected the ideology of gender” after being warned about it by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in a December 2012 Christmas address to the Roman Curia.⁷ In the address, the pope described gender theory as a “new philosophy of sexuality,” which maintained: “sex is no longer a given element of nature” but “a social role we choose for ourselves.” The pope added that the “profound falsehood” of the theory risked an “anthropological revolution,” which would threaten human dignity by undermining the family and leading people to “deny their nature.”⁸ Following that speech, the individual Polish bishops began denouncing “gender” in mid-2013.

Our Sunday Visitor’s report on the Church’s moves: “In October [2013], the head of the Church’s Catholic Education Commission, Bishop Marek Mendyk of Legnica, said he had written to the Education Ministry, demanding gender be removed from schools. In November, Bishop Kazimierz Ryczan of Kielce wrote to Polish parliament members, urging them to ‘defend the homeland against totalitarian genderism,’ while Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski of Łódź warned that ‘gender’ would bring the ‘denial of God’ and ‘death of civilization.’”⁹

Finally, gender as an enemy appeared in the bishops’ post-Christmas pastoral letter, where it was stated that the “ideology of gender” encouraged people to “decide whether they are men or women” and “set up a new type of family,” typically based on homosexual unions. Bishops added that the ideology was being introduced to Poland “without the knowledge of society or the consent of Poles,” under the guise of resisting domestic violence and promoting equal

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

rights, and threatened “not just the family, but also our homeland and all humanity.”¹⁰

Let us have a closer look at the mechanism of manipulation in the pastoral letter. In the pastoral letter from December 29, 2013, we read that “the [ideology of gender, genderism] . . . adopts rules completely contrary to reality and an integral understanding of human nature. It claims that biological sex has no social importance, that it’s all about cultural sex, which one can freely shape and define, regardless of biological conditions.”¹¹

The most important elements of the letter were, of course, the rhetorical usage of the word ideology and the suffix -ism for gender. This was used to set up immediate skepticism if not aversion to the phenomenon, before it was actually defined. Later on, the very definition as such does not really matter. But here the manipulation goes further: the definition contradicts any definition of gender taken from any dictionary.

Since January 2014, many Polish Catholics have been confused about just what is under attack in this debate. Some media commentators believe the Church chose to highlight gender to divert public discussion away from sexual abuse by priests, which reached the headlines in Poland in early 2013. It was also suggested that gender has now been widened (in its rhetorically vague use) to cover threats to social and moral issues, from homosexuality to abortion (see the opinion of the editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Piotr Mucharski).¹² Church representatives have denied this, but many Catholics remain at a loss to explain how the storm over “gender” suddenly erupted.

Despite the surprise of many within Catholic circles, the Church pressed on with its campaign in January 2014. Addressing parliamentarians on January 23, a lecturer from Kraków’s John Paul II Papal University, Father Dariusz Oko, said “gender ideology” was being “pushed by atheists” and “threatened civilization.” Father Oko, being a real “anti-genderist” campaigner, stated: “Just as the Church criti-

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See, for example, the entry: “Bishops Attack Dangerous ‘Gender’ Ideology and Re-definition of Marriage. And from Where Else? Polonia Semper Catholica.” *RORATE CAELI Blog*, February 11, 2014, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2014/02/bishops-attack-dangerous-gender.html>.

¹² See Jonathan Luxmoore, “Polish Church Declares War on Gender Ideology.”

cized Marxist and Nazi ideology, and was persecuted for it, so now it is criticizing gender ideology.”¹³

This is echoed in social life, with Polish newspapers reporting that many parents were calling for a ban on “gender” in schools. In January, a group of teachers backed the Church in a hard-hitting statement, claiming “so-called Gender Studies” should be banned from educational institutions. Lena Kolarska-Bobińska, then higher education minister, rejected this and said Polish colleges would be denied European Union funding if they failed to comply with equality norms, which were enshrined in the national constitution. Professor Małgorzata Fuszara scorned the bishops’ “false linking” of gender with Marxism and accused them of touching off “a spirit of moral panic” from which “incompetent people are seeking political capital.” The editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny* said that “perhaps the academics teaching gender had made a mistake in failing to explain it to wider society” and continued that this may be the reason why many people are now saying that gender is an anti-religious, atheist ideology.¹⁴ This is a very valid point in the dispute and shows how unanticipated it is when academic jargon enters everyday language and how problematic the absence of clear and short definitions is.

**GENDER DISCUSSED:
HATE SPEECH AND VIOLENCE—SOME EXAMPLES**

Nevertheless, many Polish public figures and politicians use the word gender and have constructed a new social monster—gender ideology. Here, I would like to present two examples of the consequence of the debate: the first—how the gender debate became a source of social violence, and the second—a misuse of the language of feminist research on sexuality (the “third sex” term) by a PiS politician, namely the spokesman for the Polish government.

An interesting example of anti-gender rhetoric was the explanation offered by Elżbieta Witek, the spokeswoman for the government, in

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

2013.¹⁵ In a short interview she accused “gender of promoting the ideology of gender” (without seemingly being aware that she was using a tautology), she called gender “the third sex,” and connected it with the sexualization of children and sex education in schools, through which parents would lose control over their children, and during which children would lose identification with their biological genders.

This example shows how populist, vague, and inconsistent such political interventions can be, aimed at re-establishing certain positions without any attempt of understanding the concept itself. The discourse is represented by politicians in sentences that are grammatically correct but logically inconsistent. The only function of this futile definition is phatic: to create a feeling of danger and uncertainty, or to denote the disturbance of some safe and known status quo (normality).

ROOTS OF MISUNDERSTANDING

Why have so few academics who announced the devilish character of gender (like Paweł Bortkiewicz) or politicians (Elżbieta Witek) taken such little effort to understand “gender” as a concept? I am convinced that the roots of this intentional misunderstanding of what gender is are the following: first, one source of misunderstanding is associating gender with an old “enemy,” in this case, setting it against the “conservative normality,” namely associating gender with feminism, or broadly speaking, women who want to revolt against the traditional order. In the 1980s, Joan Scott noted that gender was used as a synonym for women. She wrote: “In its simplest recent usage, ‘gender’ is a synonym for ‘women.’ Any number of books and articles whose subject is women’s history have in the past few years substituted ‘gender’ for ‘women’ in their titles. In some cases, this usage, though vaguely referring to certain analytic concepts, is actually about the political acceptability of the field. In these instances, the use of ‘gender’ is meant to denote scholarly seriousness of ‘gender,’ which

¹⁵ Interview by the TV in Lublin: POLSKA. Ideologia gender a fundusze unijne. Published on the 11 December, 2013. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YatQ5mfgmos> (accessed: 12.02. 2017).

has a more neutral and objective sound than ‘women’. . . . This use of ‘gender’ is one facet of what might be called the quest of feminist scholarship for academic legitimacy in the 1980s.”¹⁶

Gender then was meant to be more objective than Women’s Studies, which tended to be treated as biased, unprofessional, and ideological. Nevertheless gender as a concept has survived being linked with “feminism” and “women” as the so-called “other” sex, and as such it has become misunderstood in the Church’s reading, becoming a synonym of all that is counter to the heteronormative order, which provokes a strong inclination against feminist standpoints.

SEXUALIZATION OF CHILDREN

The Polish discussion about gender and sexual education is also highly emotional. “It is not normal!” shout PiS politicians, referring to a school curriculum that includes classes on sexuality, since, they argue, the family should give children knowledge about this sphere of life. Minister of Education Anna Zalewska announces elusively that she “will not let ‘sex educators’ into schools.”¹⁷ Reasonable voices are often drowned out, like those such as Joanna Kluzik-Rostkowska’s, the ex-minister of education, who said: “I believe that sex education allows children to be able to avoid many dangers. Of course, it is that information or knowledge about sexuality and the various situations that are associated with it, which should be adapted to the age of the child.”¹⁸

Any rational discussion in the public sphere appears to have been rejected by the new government, which seems to want to take back Poland to some mythical traditional order. Since the beginning of 2016, we have heard emotionally charged accusations against: sex education, gender ideology, and feminism as national dangers. Sud-

¹⁶ Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” 1056.

¹⁷ See, for example, “W Polityce.pl,” accessed February 2, 2017, <http://wpolityce.pl/spoleczenstwo/273677-anna-zalewska-szefowa-men-we-wsieci-nie-wpuszcze-seks-edukatorow-do-szkol-trzeba-szanowac-intymnosc-mlodych-ludzi>.

¹⁸ See *Na Temat Blog*, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://natemat.pl/163917,seksedukatorzy-beda-mieli-zakaz-wstepu-do-szkol-joanna-kluzik-rostkowska-to-jest-mikro-zamach-na-autonomie-szkol>.

denly, alongside gender as an enemy of normality, sexual education became another danger to the family, which is understood in conservative categories and set as the only norm. Anything that is not that family (heterosexual, with children) is constructed as a threat to society. This threat is moreover created as aimed against children (“our children”, and the inclusive “our” plays an important rhetorical role here). And all this is juxtaposed to purity, respect for the family, and restraint. The very structure of the phrase, “our children” is, in fact, an ideological appropriation of children, which is constructed by imposing a false definition with apocalyptic consequences, a strategy of intimidation aiming simply at the discrediting of “the enemy.”

An honest discussion concerning body politics in Poland seems to be taboo, whether it is about abortion, or gender, or in-vitro fertilization. All are locked in hermetic spheres of ideological presumptions, where no social consequences or actual facts based on research can be trusted. The omnipresence of mistrust, suspicion, and the feeling of conspiracy is surprisingly strong, and what seems to be the strongest concept within those discourses is the notion of normality, a conservative and, in many cases, religiously based presumption that once upon a time there was a mythical society free from problems: these kinds of problems. It is the least plausible concept of all, but it works rhetorically.

ABORTION: A TEST OF DEMOCRACY

“To support a total ban on abortion is crazy. But to give full rights to abortion to women is also a mistake,” I read on Facebook. It is a woman who writes it, a thinking, intellectual woman. As October 2016 began, my Facebook wall, like the wall of “Dziewuchy Dziewuchom” (Girls for girls), a women’s activist group, is full of initiatives opposing the parliamentary debate on the restrictive abortion law. So, why is it crazy to allow abortion? Will women use it as a contraceptive? I ask these questions provocatively, aware of all the arguments that are used by pro-life advocates who construct women as a promiscuous and irresponsible. As this text was being written, the protests, so-called “black protests” (*czarne protesty*), were being orga-

nized all over Poland. When supporting the existing, restrictive anti-abortion law in Poland becomes an act of liberal and progressive politics—because we risk an even worse one—it is only fair to say that that all Polish citizens (men and women) have been trapped in a political game by those who do not want to hear, do not want to discuss, do not want to know, but are convinced of their so-called “pro-life” virtue and power.

The law proposed in the parliamentary debate in early April 2014 was a real shock: the present abortion law from 1993 does not foresee the possibility of terminating abortion in any case apart from in a threat to the mother’s life and psychological well-being (for example, in case the pregnancy is a result of an illegal act) or an evidently deformed fetus. The new anti-abortion law scratches all these exceptions, which fully criminalizes abortion in fact. April 2016 is an important month in the history of body politics in Poland: PiS finally introduced its policy (partly responsible for its success in elections) to support Polish families with more than one child, each family getting five hundred zlotys a month for each child (starting from the second). This pro-family policy was accompanied by the proposition to tighten the abortion law, which already made Poland’s the most restrictive anti-abortion law in Europe. Polish women began to coordinate quickly. The Facebook initiative “Girls for Girls” became the most important platform for passing on information. Nevertheless, these thousands of voices did not stop the proposition from moving forward legally. Many Polish women even went on strike to express their protest against the law.

Any anti-abortion law assumes that the first instinct of a woman is not to protect unborn life, but to get rid of it. Nobody seems to hear or believe the voices that say that abortion is always the ultimate choice. Fighting for a revision of the existing 1993 abortion law requires faith that someone in parliament and the government will be as brave, intelligent, and responsible as recently deceased Simone Veil was in the French Government in 1974, when she fought for the liberalization of a law that was almost identical to the current Polish anti-abortion law. During her final speech, she was insulted and abused, but the law was successfully introduced. She famously said something which should be remembered by everybody who wants to

take part in debate on abortion: “First, I would like to share a woman’s conviction, I apologize to it in front of an assembly made almost exclusively by men: no woman ever resorted to abortion with pleasure, you just have to hear the women, it is always a tragedy, it will always be a tragedy.”¹⁹

Body politics in Poland under PiS has become a disturbing space of chauvinistic discourse, shaming strategies, and the diminishing and ignoring of women. Contemporary body politics shows that Polish culture still bears strong features of patriarchy; women should be praised and work hard but in which the decisive voice should be given to solutions that support traditional gender roles and male culture. And this had nothing to do with the goals of real men, among whom there are many supporters of truly feminist and progressive values.

In a 2009 speech in which she assessed twenty-five years of Polish democracy, Maria Janion expressed her disappointment in applying equality policies, the anti-abortion law, and the relatively small presence of women in public life. She summarized this by saying that Polish democracy appeared to be a male democracy. The “male” character of Polish democracy should not be read as an allegation against men, but as an attempt to sustain values that are oppressive to women.²⁰

The contemporary debate on gender, the invention of genderism, and gender ideology as a new form of witch hunting is clearly another sign of the conservative and “masculine” character of Polish democracy, and it needs to be stressed that this masculine character may be highly oppressive for all sexes and genders. At the height of the anti-gender “war,” a letter was sent to the Pope. It was a letter signed by, among others, Professor Magdalena Środa, and it called on the Pope to stop the false and unreasonable usage of gender by Polish Catholic Church; it was painfully unsuccessful. The open answer seemed to convey the same assumption: there is gender ideology, genderism, gender lobbies and it is dangerous. There is no doubt that

¹⁹ See the complete speech, accessed December 21, 2016, <http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/evenements/2015/anniversaire-loi-veil>.

²⁰ M. Janion, *Bohater spisek, śmierć. Wykłady żydowskie* (Warszawa: Virtualo, 2009). See my Introduction to Urszula Chowaniec et al., *Women’s Voices and Feminism in Polish Cultural Memory* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2012).

this is a rhetorical move: Catholic circles are fully aware of the utility of gender as concept to study and describe social contexts, and it is not against the doctrine as such (see *Supplement*, “Gender: fakty i mity”/Gender: facts and myths of *Tygodnik Powszechny*). In this supplement from December 2013, Sławomira Walczewska, a famous Polish feminist and activist, said: “let’s stop fighting the word. Indeed, it might be a linguistic trick to stop the debate. Avoid the word gender. Once we exchange ‘gender’ with a cultural role, it will be easier to swallow. But will it be enough? Or is the need of the enemy stronger?” The last two questions still remained unanswered, or perhaps they are simply rhetorical.