Women and Migration

Responses in Art and History

EDITED BY

DEBORAH WILLIS, ELLYN
TOSCANO AND KALIA
BROOKS NELSON

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12. Unveiling Violence: Gender and Migration in the Discourse of Right-Wing Populism

Debora Spini

Migrant women are the target of tangible and material forms of structural violence that are not visible to the public gaze: exploitation, abuse and, most of all, enslavement. Despite this, public attention tends to focus on their apparent status as oppressed victims of their misogynist cultures. Veils and burkinis — and the ocean of words that they never fail to provoke — hide the reality of the massive, enduring structural violence affecting migrant women. The structural violence to which they are subjected is related to the causes of their migration, primarily the need to leave in response to economic distress, human rights violations or political instability, and also to their condition of statelessness, which makes them extremely vulnerable. The symbolic violence exercised upon migrant women is no less real for its being elusive. It becomes manifest through practices of ‘othering’, constructing the migrant woman as a victim of oppression (by her own ‘culture’) and thus in need of rescue (by ‘us’).

This chapter explores the use of gender in the political discourse of European right-wing, ethnocentric and xenophobic populist movements, with a focus on the specific forms of violence, both structural

and symbolic, to which migrant women are subjected.¹ This analysis points to a broader framework, as the diverse forms of violence that are inflicted upon migrant women expose contradictions concerning the real place and role of women in Western political modernity. To this end, my chapter will consider how right-wing populism makes use of fear of rape and 'sexual terrorism', and how mechanisms of othering appropriate, manipulate and racialize issues that are traditionally part of a feminist agenda, turning them into weapons for xenophobic movements and parties.

The Context: Europe's Invasion

Asylum and immigration are probably the most controversial issues in the European Union; mentioned seemingly in any public debate, from the crisis of welfare system to education, from gender to religion, they increase the emotional temperature to white heat. The perception of living through a migration or refugee crisis is widespread all over the European Union, and the term 'invasion' is now commonplace. A look at figures — necessary, unavoidable preparation for any kind of philosophical, political or ethical reflection — reveals the large gap between facts and perceptions.

EU official documents and policies clearly differentiate between immigrants and asylum seekers or refugees; yet, the two categories overlap in the common public perception.² This common sense is not altogether mistaken. The line separating immigrants and asylum seekers is in fact hard to draw, as political instability often causes or at least co-exists with extreme economic deprivation. Although poverty is a major push factor in migratory flows towards Europe, the

1 Bourdieu defines structural violence as that form of violence whereby structures of domination become interiorised. Symbolic violence allows situations of domination and oppression to survive even when the external structures of domination are removed. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). As noted by Slavoj Žižek, symbolic violence does not replace but strengthens structural violence; see his *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

2 Whilst an immigrant is a person that voluntarily leaves his/her home country, an asylum seeker is a person leaving his/her country for fear of death or persecution because of gender, race, religion, opinion or membership of a specific social group, who would not have left in other circumstances.

category of ‘economic refugee’ is not included in EU legislation. In the common perception and in most media representations, therefore, the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘immigrant’ are interchangeable,³ thus conveying the message that many asylum seekers are not ‘real’ refugees, but illegal immigrants, driven ‘only’ by poverty and famine, evidently not considered as valid reasons to roam freely around the world. The EU in fact welcomes ‘high quality’ immigrants (i.e. highly skilled workers) whilst discouraging unskilled migrants who are less promising members of the workforce.

By ‘refugee crisis’, official EU documents describe the more than one million people who tried to reach Europe in the last three years, mostly from Syria and to a lesser degree from other troubled places, ‘the greatest mass movement of people since the Second World War’.⁴ Undoubtedly, the past few years have seen a dramatic raise in the number of men and women trying to enter the EU — with a significant spike in 2015. According to the EU Commission website, asylum applications in the EU reached 2.5 million between 2015–2017, with 2.3 million illegal crossings detected during the same period. Statistics however indicate a decline in the second part of 2017 and in the first quarter of 2018. There were 650,000 asylum application requests in 2017.⁵ Considering that the total population of the EU numbers 508 million inhabitants, calculating the extent of the ‘invasion’ is not difficult. By contrast, between 2015 and 2017 Lebanon received 1.2 million refugees, joining a total population of circa 4.5 million.⁶

Figures of refugee and asylum seekers must be matched with other numbers: those of deaths in the Mediterranean. As of 28 June 2017, the day of the Women and Migration Conference that inspired this volume, the estimated number of casualties was 2,557 people drowned

3 This chapter will also apply the term ‘immigrant’ and ‘migrant’ both to women who are actually immigrants and to those who should be more appropriately defined as refugees or asylum seekers. This misuse of terms is intentional, so as to reflect common perceptions.

4 European Commission, *The EU and the Refugee Crisis* (European Commission, 2016), <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1aa55791-3875-4612-9b40-a73a593065a3>

5 European Commission, *Eurostat. Statistics Explained. Asylum Statistics* (European Commission, 2018), http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics

6 Ibid.

or missing.⁷ The first six months of 2018 see a sharp reduction in the number of arrivals via the Mediterranean (45,700, about 5 times lower than 2016), matched by an even sharper rise in the number of deaths: in the first months of 2018, about 1,000 human beings met their death crossing to European shores. The rate is now of 1 death every 7 crossings: one year ago, in the first half of 2018, the rate was 1 in 38.⁸

In 2016 the EU signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the government of Libya; under its auspices the Italian government signed an agreement with Libya in February 2017 in order to stop illegal departures from Libya. According to Amnesty International, this agreement has resulted in at least 20,000 people being intercepted and transferred to Libyan detention centers.⁹ Conditions in Libyan detention centers have been defined as 'horrific' by Amnesty International, which has repeatedly denounced various forms of torture that are allegedly used there, and charged European governments — Italy in particular — not only of being 'fully aware of these abuses but [...] complicit in them'.¹⁰

Immigration and asylum are the sources of profound divisions within the European Union; these splits threaten to undermine the very foundation of the EU as a political project: a Europe without borders. Brexit is a brutal, yet not isolated, demonstration of how immigration-related fears and anxieties may jeopardize the very future of the European Union. The four 'Visegrad countries' (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) flatly refused to take in refugees, in violation of the spirit of all the treaties. In many other cases, frontiers were closed before being opened again, as in August 2017 when Austria sent troops to patrol its border with Italy. In 2018, French president Emmanuel

7 European Parliament, *EU Migrant Crisis: Facts and Figures* (European Parliament, 2017), <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20170629STO78630/eu-migrant-crisis-facts-and-figures>

8 United Nations High Commission on Refugees, *As Mediterranean Sea Arrivals Decline and Death Rates Rise, UNHCR Calls for Strengthening of Search and Rescue* (UNHCR, 2018), <http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/7/5b3f270a4/mediterranean-sea-arrivals-decline-death-rates-rise-unhcr-calls-strengthening.html>

9 Amnesty International, *Libya: European Governments Complicit in Horrific Abuse of Refugees and Migrants* (Amnesty International, 2017), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/12/libya-european-governments-complicit-in-horrific-abuse-of-refugees-and-migrants/>

10 Ibid.

Macron closed the border with Italy across the Alps. Activists who helped immigrants stuck in the snow are now facing criminal charges.¹¹

The most noteworthy phenomena in European politics is the growth of right-wing xenophobic populist movements and parties; although in most cases these existed well before the refugee crisis, they have thrived off it in their race towards power. Among them, Victor Orban's Fidesz in Hungary, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National in France, Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid in Denmark, and Nigel Farage's UKIP¹² in the UK,¹³ last but not least, Italy's elections of 4 March 2018 brought to power a populist coalition, whose main party is the openly xenophobic Lega, led by Matteo Salvini, now Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of the Interior. One of the first acts of the newly inaugurated government was the closure of Italian ports to NGO rescue ships. Salvini described rescue ships as 'seafaring taxis'¹⁴ and repeatedly prevented Italian coastguard boats from providing help.¹⁵ Hundreds of migrants were thus driven back to Libyan camps.

Democracy's Distorting Mirror

The term 'populism' is extremely difficult to define and often improperly used as it may indicate either a mode of political communication or a complete ideology. Whilst Europe is currently home to a particularly rampant form of right-wing populism, different actors across the left/right political spectrum may be defined as 'populist' as demonstrated by many progressive and 'leftist' forces, beginning with the late

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- 11 France24, 'Foreign Activists on Trial in France for Helping Migrants Enter the Country', 31 May 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180531-france-immigration-foreign-activists-trial-helping-migrants-enter-country-alps>
 - 12 Nigel Farage has subsequently left UKIP, but he was formerly its leader and its most high-profile representative.
 - 13 Cas Mudde, *Populist Right Radical Parties in Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
 - 14 Fiorenza Sarzanini, 'Migranti, scontro Italia-Malta. Salvini: "Porti chiusi all'Aquarius" Conte: "Noi lasciate soli"', *Corriere della Sera*, 10 June 2018, https://roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/18_giugno_11/migranti-salvini-la-aquarius-non-potra-approdare-un-porto-italiano-28e19a16-6cb2-11e8-8fe1-92e098249b61.shtml?refresh_ce-cp
 - 15 'Lifeline soccorre 400 migranti, Salvini: "Stroncheremo mafia immigrazione"', *Mediterraneo Cronaca*, 21 June 2018, <http://www.mediterraneocronaca.it/2018/06/21/lifeline-soccorre-400-migranti-salvini-stroncheremo-mafia-immigrazione/>

nineteenth century Populist Party in the US, or Peronism in Latin America or, more recently, Podemos or the Occupy movement. Echoing the Latin American experience, radical philosopher Ernesto Laclau saw populism as the formation of an anti-hegemonic popular bloc.¹⁶ The prevailing definitions in scholarly literature nonetheless focus on the anti-democratic potential of populism, arguing that its characteristic feature is its conception of 'people' as a homogeneous community, which does not allow for any internal diversification or dissent.¹⁷ This anti-pluralist conception of 'the people' causes right-wing populist movements to display a particularly virulent brand of ethnocentric nationalism, whereby the 'nation' is no longer composed of citizens united by shared political principles, but as community yoked by 'natural' or 'cultural' bonds. Equally typical of populist movements and parties is the claim to represent the 'real' people (the man or woman in the street) against the corrupt and scheming elites. Populist movements thus nurture a profound distrust in representative democracy, arguing that it should be replaced by dubious forms of 'direct' democracy (such as extensive use of referenda or technological platforms that would replace parliamentary discussions).

Particularly fertile and relevant for this reflection is Nadia Urbinati's illuminating definition of populism as a distorting mirror of democracy. In fact populism could not exist without the affirmation of popular sovereignty, that is of 'the people' as the only legitimate source of political authority, which is, when all is said and done, the basic foundation of any democratic politics. As a mirror, populism reflects many traits of democracy, yet, it also distorts and perverts them, to the point of making them unrecognizable.¹⁸ If we invert Urbinati's definition, we could say that populism helps us to see the real face of Western democracy, and how far it has come from its normative reference.

In the Western tradition, the notion of 'the people' is profoundly ambiguous as it often coincides with an even more controversial term, that of nation, which constantly oscillates between two poles. On the one hand, it connotes a diverse, plural version of citizenship, defined by

16 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).

17 Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth and the People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2014); Manuel Anselmi, *Populism: A Short Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

18 Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured*.

political values; Jürgen Habermas' view of democracy is a paradigmatic example, where 'popular sovereignty' does not materialize in an anthropomorphic subject but is rather assimilated to a flow of discursive, deliberative processes whereby citizens participate in elaborating a common will. On the other, in Western modernity, 'nation' has in many cases meant a community that described itself as natural, kept together by notions such as 'blood' or 'heritage': this second view evidently paves the way for extreme ethno-centric interpretations.

References to gender are key for both conceptions, although in very different ways. The role of gender in the second understanding of the people is more straightforward and evident. Insofar as a political community is defined by 'natural' bonds, such as those of national/ethnic identity, women and their bodies play a key function, as the main guarantee for the reproduction of blood ties: hence the imperative to control women's bodies. The first model requires more thorough deconstruction and critical work, as gender equality and gender justice are supposed to be among the qualifying values of modern democratic citizenship.

However, modern democracy was born without women, in theory and in practice. Mainstream readings of the great canon of modern philosophy assume that authors such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke or Jean-Jacques Rousseau place at the center of their political theories an individual who is capable of political agency as a rational being who is master of himself. In fact, political philosophers who declared consent to be the only source of legitimate political authority never described such individuals in a neutral way, but spoke of male heads-of-family: essentially, patriarchs, who had the power to act for all their dependents, children and women. Carol Pateman has shown evidence of a pre-existing pact between men, which stipulates the subjection of women in exchange for protection.¹⁹ The characteristics of those who subscribed to the original pact are routinely associated with masculinity (rational control over emotion, capacity for self-government), and considered alien to women. Incidentally, these features defining male political agency are also associated with European-ness or more generally whiteness.²⁰ Men, and men only, participate in the foundation of a legitimate political

19 Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

20 Iris M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

community, as they are considered as belonging 'naturally' to the public sphere, whilst women are just as 'naturally' confined to the private sphere. The political covenant concerns only the public sphere, the sole province of men, and does not in any way undermine the permanence of patriarchal structures of power in the private sphere. Furthermore, the pact among brothers perpetuates male control of women and their bodies.²¹ According to this argument, the public space has been defined for men and by men: in order to be accepted within it, women have to shed any characteristics that do not comply with the standards set by masculinity. Historical accounts match this philosophical critique, describing how women are latecomers to the public sphere of Western modernity and how they have had to fight during every step of their long march towards inclusion. These deep-set contradictions still have an impact on contemporary politics; that the presence of women in democratic public spaces is not only relatively recent but still quite insecure is demonstrated by a wide range of indicators, most obviously the small number of women in positions of political authority. The distorting mirror of democracy — populism — could not fail to reflect these contradictions, and appropriate them.

Racializing Otherness

Gender is a pivotal element in the discourse of right-wing populism in the context of a public debate framed by terms such as 'invasion', and influenced by political myths such as the clash of civilizations, or the Islamization of Europe. It is no surprise that right-wing populism makes abundant use of the most traditional stereotypes, because of the emphasis it places on people-as-a-natural-community; more surprising is its capacity to turn feminist agendas to its advantage. In the past, most right-wing populist parties and movements held a rather traditional view of gender roles, in which women were celebrated for their motherly mission; recently, right-wing populist discourse on gender is changing with amazing speed, as to appropriate many 'feminist' elements in a ethnocentric key.²²

21 Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*; idem, *The Disorder of Women, Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

22 Mudde, *Populist Right Radical Parties*, pp. 90–95.

The reference to the 'Immigrant Woman' is an important facet of the rhetorical arsenal of European xenophobia. The construction of this fictional subject follows patterns of othering well known to postcolonial critique, basically reproducing the script of the 'third-world woman',²³ as well as sharing many features of the racialization process common to all immigrants. Being an immigrant is made to define every aspect of one's identity and erases social, cultural, historical differences. Just as 'tous les noires', all the Blacks, look alike,²⁴ so do immigrants, as though Vietnam and Mali could be the same, or the life experience of someone landing in Lampedusa on an inflatable boat could be the same of a second-generation PhD graduate. This racialization of 'the immigrant' also includes religious identity. The invasion of Europe is normally associated with one religion. The migrant person is almost invariably 'Islamic', as every non-Westerner has to be Muslim; Africans cannot be Christians, nor can Asians, even less Arabs. Within this forcibly homogenized identity, any differentiation is further denied and religion is identified with 'culture', which is also racialized. 'Culture' is always non-Western, as only in the West can people possess rationality and exercise autonomous moral judgement.²⁵ In her analysis of French media and popular culture, Rolhaya Diallo notices that crimes committed by immigrants are always explained with a reference to culture, which never happens when a European commits the same action. Gender-based violence is a typical demonstration: crimes perpetrated by Europeans are normally described in purely individualized and personalized terms, with culture never listed among the influential factors. Racialization thus depends on a wider process of the reification of culture.²⁶ Once conceived of as a monolith, in essentialist and ahistorical terms, a reified culture is not allowed any space for negotiation or autonomous reappropriation.²⁷ Islam is thus reformulated as an undifferentiated and

23 Gayatri C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review*, 30 (1988), 61–88.

24 Rokhaya Diallo, *Racisme: mode d'emploi* (Paris: Larousse, 2011), p. 14.

25 Anne Phillips, *Multiculturalism without Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 32.

26 Sheyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

27 Phillips, *Multiculturalism without Culture*.

monochrome 'culture' determining every aspect of collective as well as of personal behavior. Interestingly, this process of the racialization of religion in terms of the cultural foundations of collective identity is also affecting Western Christianity. In fact, xenophobic movements tend to reappropriate Christianity by defining it exclusively in terms of a way of life quintessential to national identity. This mechanism permits xenophobic movements to parade the Christian roots of Europe whilst at the same time being in open conflict with the basic values of human compassion that lie at the core of the Christian creed. Italian Deputy Prime Minister Salvini, for example, wanted to decorate with crucifixes those same ports he forbade to NGO ships saving human lives.

This process of racialization is itself a form of symbolic violence, as it consists of the continuous erasure of one's identity; migrant women experience it in specific forms. The identification between immigrant and Islam brings to light an array of myths, prejudices and fantasies when applied to women. The cultural and religious determination of identity — necessarily conducive to oppression and victimhood — becomes manifest in the Muslim woman's body, which thus becomes 'the ground on which national identity is constructed' and 'a marker of community's place'.²⁸ The Muslim woman is defined solely by her religious identity — and as religion is identified with reified culture, being Muslim defines her *in toto*. Consequently, 'Muslim women are all alike. Whether they come from Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, Bosnia or Indonesia they all come from 'Islamland'.²⁹ If culture is represented as monolith, any appeal for the co-existence of different communities within the same political space can easily be cast off as an impoverished multiculturalism summarized by the all-excusing mantra 'it's their culture...', a mantra that would necessarily first victimize women and their rights. In this black-or-white representation of identity there is no place for negotiation or innovative action. Groundbreaking theological explorations within Islam itself or the vibrant agency of individual activists or political movements are largely ignored; consequently the only route to freedom for immigrant women is to dismiss 'their culture' to embrace Western 'values'.

28 Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 86.

29 Lila Abu Lughoud, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 69.

Along with culture and religion, feminism too is in the process of being racialized. Political forces on the extreme right present themselves as the true defenders of women's rights, which in turn are described as identity markers of European values.³⁰ Marine Le Pen proudly claims to be 'a free French woman, who for all her life could enjoy and cherish freedoms conquered by the hard struggles of our mothers and grandmothers', and affirms that 'the migration crisis marks the beginning of the end of women's rights'.³¹ Sarah Farris' poignant definition of Femonationalism perfectly captures the appropriation of feminism by right-wing forces.³² Femonationalism capitalizes on the mainstreaming of feminism that has, at least to a certain extent, marked Western societies — whether this transformation is genuine and far-reaching is not for these pages to discuss — whereby some kind of general consensus on notions such as 'women's rights' is now part of the *koiné* of most supranational institutions, from the United Nations to the European Union. Sectors of mainstream liberal Western feminism also fall into the trap of 'with us or against us', as is the case for Elizabeth Bandinter's appeal that women should not lower their guard before multiculturalism and *islamogauchistes*. On a much deeper and more articulate level, this is also true of the question 'is multiculturalism bad for women' asked by the late Susan Moller Okin.³³ This Femonationalist mechanism of appropriation extends to all issues pertaining to sexuality and the use of the body, to embrace even LGBT issues.³⁴ Whilst sexual liberation has been a battleground for the struggle for individual empowerment, 'the appropriation, in a postcolonial context of freedom and equality applied to gender and sexualities as the emblems of

30 Francesca Scrinzi, 'Gender, Religion, Secularism and the "Newness" of Marine Le Pen's Party', in A. Petö, M. Köttig and R. Bitzan (eds.), *Gender, and Far Right Politics in Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 127–40; Leticia Sabsay, *The Political Imaginary of Sexual Freedom. Subjectivity and Power in the New Sexual Democratic Turn* (New York and London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016).

31 Samuel Laurent and Pierre Breteau, 'Marine Le Pen, une féministe à la mémoire courte', 15 January 2016, *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/01/15/marine-le-pen-une-feministe-a-la-memoire-courte_4848295_4355770.html

32 Sarah Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

33 Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

34 Eric Fassin, 'La démocratie sexuelle et le conflit des civilisations', *Multitudes*, 26 (2006), 123–31, <https://doi.org/10.3917/mult.026.0123>

democratic modernity' may become a weapon for imperial politics. 'If "we" are defined by our democracy, "they" can only be the dark mirror of our Enlightenment'.³⁵ According to right-wing political propaganda, women's freedom is basically identified with the 'free' use of sexuality, which in turn entails the display of the body; conversely, the lack thereof is identified with hijabs, veils, burkas, burkinis and any other piece of cloth. Sexual democracy becomes the criterion to judge the possibility of immigrants' integration into Western society.

The distinction between integration and inclusion is therefore essential to deconstruct such appropriation mechanisms. Integration is not immediately synonymous with inclusion into the sphere of democratic citizenship. Inclusion³⁶ implies extending to all members of a political community the concrete means to exercise individual autonomy. Inclusion is also the result of a series of struggles for recognition, in which different political subjects engage in transforming dialectic relationships.³⁷ The term integration still resounds with assimilation, in which 'others' are requested to become, by hook or by crook, 'like us'. Since, in this representation, immigrant women lack the non-negotiable prerequisite to exercise citizenship, i.e. autonomous agency, they become the target of 'inclusion policies' rather than being considered as bearers of rights.³⁸ This one-way notion of integration rests on the assumption that women's freedom and gender equality are exquisitely Western values, whilst all other cultures continue to be ossified through prejudice; in this perspective, becoming free is equivalent to rejecting one's 'culture' and adopting Western moral autonomy.

Sexual Wars

Czech President Milos Zeman declared that the Muslim Brotherhood was using refugees in an invasion plan against Europe:³⁹ this is

35 Ibid., p. 127, translation mine.

36 Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

37 Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1992).

38 For an extensive analysis of such integration policies and their compatibility with a neoliberal economy, see Sarah Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

39 Matthew Day, 'Muslim Brotherhood "Using Migrants as Invasion Force" to Seize Control of Europe, Czech President Claims', *Telegraph*, 5 January 2016, <https://>

only one example of the widespread obsession with invasion. The vocabulary of invasion necessarily evokes war, and with war another specter makes its appearance: rape. In fact, sexual violence occupies a central place in the gender-varnished propaganda of xenophobic European parties and movements. Myths about sexuality are a crucial component of many responses to immigration, as well exemplified in Michel Houellebecq's blockbuster novel *Soumission* (2015). The rougher version of this discourse is well known: as Europe is being invaded, 'they' (immigrant men) come here to rape 'our women', whom it is imperative to defend. European media and social networks are simply bursting with stories of rapes committed by immigrants against European women. The mechanisms of othering create a weak, oppressed victim — the migrant woman — as reported above, and they find a mirror-like match in the image of aggressive masculinity embodied by the immigrant man. Immigrant men are described as hypersexualized and predatory, thus reproducing the old colonial fear of the rape of white women by Black men; however, in the European context they are more identified by their religion (Islam) than by color. Anti-immigration policies and even the most inhuman anti-asylum policies are justified by reference to the danger of rape. The Lega website bursts with accounts of rape perpetrated by 'immigrants'.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of the events in Cologne on New Year's Eve in 2015, in which over a thousand people made allegations of sexual assault and other crimes and in which the chief suspects were a group of male immigrants,⁴¹ Marine Le Pen spoke of *males dechainés*, males unchained.⁴² Dutch far-right populist leader Geert Wilders suggested an appropriate response would be to 'lock up' all male refugee asylum seekers as they are 'testosterone bombs'; immigrant masculine bodies

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/czechrepublic/12082757/Muslim-Brotherhood-using-migrants-as-invasion-force-to-seize-control-of-Europe-Czech-president-claims.html

⁴⁰ <https://www.leganord.org/>

⁴¹ For a profound analysis of the Cologne events, see Alessandra Bocchetti, Ida Dominijanni, Bianca Pomaranzi, and Bia Sarasini, 'Speculum the Other Man: Eight Points on the Spectres of Cologne', *Internazionale*, 3 February 2016, <https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/bocchetti-dominijanni-pomeranzi-sarasini/2016/02/03/speculum-other-man-spectres-cologne>

⁴² Dominique Albertini, 'Le féminisme instrumentalisé par le FN', *Libération*, 14 January 2016, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/01/14/le-feminisme-instrumentalise-par-le-fn_1426486

are the weapons to fight a 'sexual jihad', and rape is a form of 'sexual terrorism'.⁴³

The calculated use of supposedly 'feminist' topics has proven to be a very profitable operation for the far right, as on the one hand it helps to make xenophobia and racism presentable⁴⁴ and on the other, it provides as an enticing fringe benefit the chance of upsetting the ranks of progressive and democratic forces by playing different inclusion agendas against each other: women's rights or inclusion of immigrants? Beyond its most picturesque aspects, this strategy of appropriation sheds light on many unresolved knots within Western democracy and helps to show its real face. The 'defense' of women does not stem from a genuine commitment to women's freedom: it testifies to the desire of defending what is considered to be 'ours' — our country, our ways, and consequently 'our' women. The reference to rape once again makes the control of women's bodies an essential step in the construction of a political community. The reference to the 'rape of our women' connects with the narrative of invasion (Europe invaded by immigrants) and war (clash of civilisation, war against the West) that is so central in right-wing xenophobic propaganda. In war, rape is a sign of conquest, and in the colonial narrative the body of women represents the conquered land:⁴⁵ the fear of rape reflects the fear that Europe may be turned from colonizer to colonized. Women and their bodies are essential for the reproduction of the nation: consequently, rape is an attack on the deepest sources of the national community. Sexual violence thus plays a crucial role in nation-building. In a male dominated framework, 'Rape is a sign from men to men'.⁴⁶

In the xenophobic manipulation of rape, the protagonists are immigrant men and 'our' women. The immigrant / refugee women are not in focus; they remain in the background, locked up in their condition of 'cultural victimhood'. The manipulative use of supposedly

43 Janene Pieters, 'Wilders: Lock up all Male Asylum Seekers; Threat to Dutch Women', *NL Times*, 19 January 2016, <https://nltimes.nl/2016/01/19/wilders-lock-male-asylum-seekers-threat-dutch-women>

44 Sylvie Tyssot, 'Bilan d'un féminisme d'État', *Plein Droit*, 75 (2007), 15–18 (p. 16).

45 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism (The New Critical Idiom)* (London: Routledge 2005), p. 138.

46 Catherine McKinnon, *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 171.

feminist arguments, such as the identification between integration and the adoption of Western sexual mores, or the references to the fear of rape, overshadow other forms and histories of violence, which do not consist of anything ghostlike, which are, on the contrary, horrifically material. The first form of structural violence that affects migrant women is monumental and this is the necessity to migrate in itself, caused by macro structures of injustice and domination. Within the wider framework of the structural violence at the root of migratory flows, other forms of violence target women specifically, whose origin can easily be reconstructed as a series of explicit political choices. A crystal-clear example is the current agreement between the EU and Libya, and its application by the Italian government. Female migrants and asylum seekers are exposed to rape on every step of their *via crucis* towards Europe; humanitarian organization list rape as a common occurrence in Libyan facilities.

Sexual slavery is another form of widespread violence against immigrant women. Human trafficking is in itself the cause of the displacement of large number of women; furthermore, the refugee crisis provides a tremendous opportunity for this crime. Asylum-seeking women become the easy prey of slave traders, who use them for a variety of purposes, from underpaid or forced labour to fully-fledged sexual slavery. According to Save the Children Italia, there were at least 15,846 victims of trafficking in 2016, 76% of them being women and 15% underage boys and girls; 67% of the victims have been channelled towards forced prostitution, and 21% to exploitative labour.⁴⁷ Not much of this iceberg makes it above water.

Conclusion

Identity wars are fought on the bodies of women, sometimes around every inch of fabric that hides or reveals. In fact, these movements and parties are not in the forefront of fights for gender justice in issues such as the pay gap or gender-balanced presence in political and economic decision-making bodies. And as far as sexual democracy is concerned, it

⁴⁷ Save the Children Italia, 'Tratta e sfruttamento', 27 July 2018, <https://www.savethechildren.it/press/tratta-e-sfruttamento-nel-mondo-10-milioni-di-bambini-un-solo-anno-vittime-di-lavoro-forzato>

is worth noticing that many of the political movements so enraged by a veil did not support the fight of 'their own women' to access contraception, abortion, nor for legislation or policies that would undermine the patriarchal organization of the family or fight sexual abuse. The defense of the right of immigrant women to a 'free' sexuality and to the 'free' use of the body does not go hand-in-hand with support in their fight for political equality. The outcry over the condition of oppression and victimhood of immigrant women is not a sufficient reason to support their requests of full citizenship rights, which would be, if not the sole, at least a main defense against violence and inequality. A typical example is Italy, where the same right-wing populist forces that vocally denounce the oppression of Muslim women who are denied their right to suntan on the beach have opposed, with cast-iron determination, the *ius soli* laws on citizenship. Evidently, voting rights are not required for 'freedom', whilst a bikini is. The political forces that are so vocal in denouncing the sad plight of women's oppression among immigrant communities are the same that would deny non-Europeans the basic right to seek sheer physical survival by leaving their countries⁴⁸ as well as to find a decent livelihood and a dignified way of life. Equally, anti-refugee policies are justified by the need to fight trafficking, but very little attention is paid to the demand such trafficking feeds — that is, European men making use of human flesh, transforming (mostly, but not solely Black) female bodies into a commodity.

The swift appropriation of feminist themes by xenophobic movements must be taken as a wake-up call, as it shows the need for a renewed commitment to a genuine feminist critique, aimed first of all to identify these and other ambiguities within Western modernity itself. This critical work may be conducive to genuine dialogue and practical acts of solidarity, allowing us to break free of the manipulative mechanisms that seek to hide structural violence behind a veil of symbols and myths.

48 For a conceptualization of immigration as a human right, see Kieran Oberman, 'Immigration as a Human Right', in Sarah Fine and Lea Ypi (eds.), *Migration in Political Theory: The Ethics of Movement and Membership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 32–56.

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