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From "backlash" to "productive" responses.

Review essay: *Rok Smrdelj & Roman Kuhar. Anti-Gender Mobilisations in Europe and the Feminist Response: Productive Resistance.* Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025

Abstract

The book *Anti-Gender Mobilisations in Europe and the Feminist Response: Productive Resistance* (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025a) asks how feminists adapt their strategies over time in response to a new, hostile environment of anti-feminism.

This review essay critically acclaims the volume against the state-of-the-art research. It emphasises that the book advances research by focusing on the analysis of reactions; critically rethinking the concept of "backlash" for analysis; and offering a clear definition and typology of forward-looking, productive reactions to anti-gender actors on a continuum from low to high engagement with anti-gender actors.

The essay proposes that future research could further develop four aspects of the book's contributions to the field: First, methodological approaches to studying how responses to anti-gender mobilisations change over time could be further elaborated to go beyond a linear "backlash" understanding of temporality. Second, to sharpen the distinction between responses to anti-gender mobilisations and feminist mobilisations, it is argued that "productive resistance" could be further spelled out beyond the level of engagement with anti-feminists. Third, the critique of reactive logics could be extended by challenging the corresponding strict two-camp frame (feminists vs. anti-gender), instead building on a co-constitutive lens, and fourth, determining who responds beyond normative assumptions.

1. Introduction

A backlash against gender equality has become a defining feature of the social movement landscape in Europe and beyond. Women's and LGBTIQ* rights and policies are under threat, with hard-won advances being reversed. Faludi (1991) coined the term "backlash" to describe this phenomenon, and it has since become a widely studied concept. Research has mapped the actors, frames, and diffusion of anti-gender politics (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2019; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021a).

The repertoires of responses have been criticised for a lack of strategic engagement with feminist knowledge production: for example, Gill-Peterson argues that

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responses have often been given insufficient consideration of the complexities of the issue, taking anti-trans political violence as an example (Amirali et al., 2024, 250). Cattien warns that gender equality policy alone is not an adequate antidote to anti-gender politics, calling for more intersectional and anti-racist responses (2023). Studies on illiberalism have argued that, given the ideological heterogeneity of the challenges to liberal democratic norms, defenders of liberal democracy cannot rely on general counterarguments, but must tailor their responses to the specific logic of the attacks to be effective (Enyedi et al., 2025, 3).

Despite this criticism, however, feminist responses have received little attention, in comparison to the extensive body of literature devoted to the subject of feminist backlash. The European Union's call for proposals, "Feminisms for a New Age of Democracy", aimed to address this imbalance (Lombardo & Caravantes, 2024). With the goal of supporting knowledge production on resistance to gender equality in Europe and feminist democratic responses, the project "Feminist Movements Revitalising Democracy in Europe" (FIERCE) was funded, out of which *Anti-Gender Mobilisations in Europe and the Feminist Response: Productive Resistance* (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025a) resulted. Offering a comprehensive framework for understanding feminist responses, the volume fills this gap and will thus be of particular interest to the field of feminist studies. The remainder of this review essay will provide a glance into the volume's content and arguments before critically acclaiming it against the backdrop of the state-of-the-art and outlining the implications of these issues for future directions in research.

2. What the book does

The edited volume offers a comparative overview of anti-gender mobilisation and feminist and LGBTIQ* responses. It tests and extends core concepts, challenges the limits of the concept of "backlash", and advances the notion of "productive resistance" as an organising framework (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 6–10; Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–274). The introduction poses a multi-part research question: How do feminist and LGBTIQ* movements adapt under anti-gender mobilisation, antagonistic politics and the post-truth era? How do polarisation and digital media shape repertoires? And how do actors build resilience and new forms of resistance as norms erode? (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 13–14). "Productive resistance" is the central analytical focus (ibid., 15–16).

The volume comprises an introduction (ibid., 1–16), eight country case studies and a concluding chapter presenting a strategy typology (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 262–272). The cross-national synthesis highlights solidarity and inclusive spaces for action (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 16), noting a general shift towards forward-looking initiatives with limited direct engagement (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–256, 260, 262–274).

2.1 Eight country cases

In the first chapter "Contentious Gender Politics in Italy: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilisations", Anna Lavizzari, Anastasia Barone and Giada Bonu Rosenkranz demonstrate that feminist and LGBTIQ* movements adapt by employing confrontational and non-confrontational strategies, while facing significant challenges due to a stark imbalance in resources and institutional access compared to well-funded anti-gender groups. Confrontational tactics span from "loose confrontational action" like spontaneous street protests and cultural subversion to "strong confrontational actions" such as large-scale demonstrations. Non-confrontational strategies include "direct social action" through peer-to-peer support and monitoring, cultural initiatives, reshaping narratives, and "camouflage within institutional channels" (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 28–29, 33–45, 47–48).

In "Navigating Antagonism: Feminist and LGBTIQ* Responses to Slovenian Anti-Gender Mobilisations", Rok Smrdelj theorises responses against an antagonistic public sphere and identifies five categories of response, Strategic Non-Engagement, Solidarity Actions and Counter-protests, Public Education and Awareness Campaigns, Reporting Threats and Incidents to Authorities, and Social Media Moderation and Messaging Control (Smrdelj, 2025, 56; 63–77).

In "The Battle of Concepts: French Feminist Mobilizations Against the Far Right's Appropriation of the Feminist Legacy", Ségolène Pruvot proposes a categorization into two main types of responses in France: Direct responses, characterized by their promptness and focus on mitigating the immediate impact of the attacks, refer to immediate and often reactive measures taken by feminist movements to address and counteract anti-gender attacks. There are four types of direct response, strategic visibility reduction, mirroring actions, collective defense strategy, and fake news debunking. Long-term strategies focus on systemic change and developing sustainable frameworks to support feminist movements over time. These proactive and sustained efforts aim to build resilience and foster a positive cultural shift. These strategies include three types of reactions, joyful and humorous media engagement, narrative reconstruction, and educational outreach (Pruvot, 2025, 93–102).

In "From Confrontation to Avoidance: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilization in Spain", Inés Campillo, Eduardo Romanos, Igor Sádaba and Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez demonstrate that Feminist and LGBTIQ* movements in Spain adapt their strategies in response to anti-gender mobilisations, shifting between confrontational tactics like large-scale protests and non-confrontational approaches such as avoidance and institutional monitoring, depending on the political landscape (Campillo et al., 2025, 118–129).

In "Anti-Feminist and Anti-Gender Coalitions and Feminist Resilience in Turkey", Ayşe Alnıaçık and Özlem Altan-Olcay demonstrate how Feminist and LGBTIQ* movements in Turkey adapt to anti-gender mobilisations by forming diverse coali-

tions, developing creative protest methods, and utilizing digital media for knowledge production and counter-narratives. They build resilience through mutual support, transnational networking, and transforming spaces like courtrooms into venues for activism (Alnıaçık & Altan-Olcay, 2025, 138, 148–157).

In "Not Just Ranting in the Streets, but also Concrete Actions: Polish Feminist and LGBTIQ* Responses to Anti-Gender Politics", Magdalena Muszel traces a shift from reactive protest to system-oriented engagement. This adaptation includes diversifying tactics beyond protests to encompass legal activities like litigation, launching educational campaigns, and engaging in active political participation, including running in local and parliamentary elections. They also strategically engage with mainstream media, build broad coalitions, pressuring "gray zone" actors and "frenemies" and countering misinformation, thereby influencing public policy and discourse from within the system (Muszel, 2025, 168, 176, 178–190).

In "Patriarchal Backlash and Feminist Responses in Greece Today", Alexandros Kioupkiolis demonstrates how Feminist and LGBTIQ* movements adapt their strategies by employing swift, multimodal, and multi-layered counter-mobilisations that target both civil society and national and international institutions. These responses include extensive networking, public protests, digital campaigns, and the use of legal and evidence-based arguments to debunk misinformation and expose the patriarchal biases of anti-feminist initiatives. While some efforts, particularly those defending established rights like abortion, achieve rapid success, others, like the fight against mandatory joint custody, face significant challenges from well-funded and politically connected anti-feminist lobbies, highlighting the need for broader coalitions and sustained counter-hegemonic action (Kioupkiolis, 2025, 200–206, 210–216, 219–221, 223–227).

In "So Common to Score Cheap Points on Being an Antifeminist", Andreas Beyer Gregersen, Susi Meret and Lise Rolandsen Agustín show how feminist and LGBTIQ* movements in Denmark primarily respond to anti-gender mobilizations through three strategies: critique, issue reappropriation, and disengagement. While critique often addresses anti-gender movements generally, issue reappropriation involves acknowledging and integrating some concerns raised by opponents within a feminist framework. Disengagement, particularly from online debates and direct interactions, is also a common tactic, though feminist politicians face more pressure to engage with their counterparts (Beyer Gregersen et al., 2025, 229–235, 240–251).

2.2 Comparative claim: "productive resistance"

The comparative chapter, "Productive Resistance" (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–274), forms the core of the volume. The chapter compares all eight country cases and traces a shift from defensive rebuttal to a proactive phase termed "productive resistance". It critiques the backlash paradigm and offers a typology covering a

continuum of responses from reactive to proactive (ibid., 255–256, 260, 262–273). The strategies are: Public actions (ibid., 263–264); legal and institutional actions (ibid., 264–265); watchdog advocacy (ibid., 265–266); strategic communication (ibid., 267); digital activism (ibid., 268–269); strategic retreat, including non-engagement and camouflage (ibid., 269–270); community and coalition building (ibid., 271); and empowerment and protection advocacy (ibid., 271–272). A defining feature of "productive resistance" is limited direct engagement with anti-gender actors, with energies channelled into forward-looking policy work and coalition building (ibid., 263, 273).

The chapter also specifies the conditions under which the strategies qualify as "productive" and emphasises the importance of functioning democratic institutions (ibid., 262–274). Effectiveness depends on institutions, which in turn are exploited by anti-gender actors to erode democracy (ibid., 273–274).

2.3 Theoretical anchors

The volume draws on social movement studies, including movement–counter-movement dynamics, repertoires of contention, diffusion, and framing, which have been tested in digital and institutional settings (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 6–8, 13–16; Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255, 260, 263). Chapter 5 uses political-opportunity structures and collective-action frames to demonstrate how national, regional and judicial arenas reconfigure tactics over time (Campillo et al., 2025, 108–109, 127–129). Chapter 6 applies repertoire theory to repressive contexts, emphasising coalitions, municipal partnerships, courtroom disputes, and feminist knowledge infrastructures as counter-publics (Alnıaçık & Altan-Olcay, 2025, 148–157). Chapter 7 integrates alliance theory and hybrid-media systems to explain a planned shift from street protest to system-oriented engagement (Muszel, 2025, 167, 187–191). Chapter 3 incorporates Mouffe's concept of antagonism, viewing conflict as a constitutive element of the public sphere. It links strategy selection to organisational structure, resources, media access, institutional integration, and legal considerations (Smrdelj, 2025, 53–56, 72).

3. Contribution to the state-of-the-art

For three reasons the volume is an important contribution to the state of the art: First, the book focuses on analysing reactions. Second, it provides a critical rethinking of the concept of "backlash" for analysis purposes. Third, it offers a clear definition of, and typology for, forward-looking reactions.

3.1 Towards analysing responses

The FIERCE project, home to the volume, has four sister projects, all of which have been funded by the same call, namely CCINDLE ("Co-creating Inclusive Intersectional Democratic Spaces across Europe"), RESIST ("Fostering Queer

Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics"), Push*Back*Lash ("Anti-Gender Backlash and Democratic Resistance") and UN-TWIST ("Policy Recommendations for Winning Back the 'Losers of Feminism' as Mainstream Voters"). This means that there will soon be more insights from feminist research to counter anti-gender movements in Europe. However, until now, compared to vast research on anti-gender mobilisations, responses to it remain understudied. As the editors of the reviewed volume note, compared to anti-feminism, "we understand far less about how feminist and LGBTIQ* actors respond" (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025, 12).

The book fills this gap together with a growing number of existing empirical studies: Based on observations from four backsliding Central and Eastern European countries, Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania, Krizsán and Roggeband have identified three main feminist response strategies; first, turning to grassroots and disruptive protest; second, new patterns of coalition building; and third, abeyance and demise (2018, 90–91). Taking Romania's gender identity bill as a case study, Chiva (2023) analyses feminist critical actors' resilience. Both in response to far-right politics, Kitlinski and Leszkowicz (2024) examine feminist artivism in Poland; and Farvardin (2024) analyses the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran. Vivaldi demonstrates how feminist civil society organisations respond to, resist and contest reactionary biopolitics in Chile (2024, 162–172). Minj and Pandit (2024, 120) explore "ongoing feminist responses" to policies of India's BJP. Göker and Çelik (2025) identify "coping, co-optation, and resistance" as strategies of countering anti-gender challenges in local governance (2025). As mentioned above, the anthology adds eight insightful new case studies to this list.

Conceptually, scholars within the field of democratic resilience research have identified the stages and mechanisms of responses (Boese et al., 2021; Lührmann, 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021). Krizsán and Roggeband have tailored this to the context of gender policy backsliding and proposed a multi-dimensional conceptual framework to analyse feminist resilience and adaptive strategies of feminist movements in response (2018, 94–98). In 2021, the same authors have proposed a two-dimensional conceptual framework that analyses feminist responses considering how feminist groups adapt their capacities, strategies, and coalition-building in response to reconfigured state engagement with both feminist and anti-gender actors (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021b, 9–10).

Still, gender scholarship lacks a systematic framework of how anti-gender campaigns are countered. Recent feminist work begins to address this gap by e.g. analysing feminist institutional strategies (Kantola & Lombardo, 2024). Meanwhile, Amirali conceptualises anti-anti-gender organising as "creative, lived responses" in the sense of embodiment, prefiguration, and politics of presence (Lorey, 2022): "Together, we create something which serves as an inspiration to help us move in that direction" (Amirali et al., 2024, 259). The biggest contribution of the

anthology is its role in filling this gap. By advancing the reaction-centred agenda from a feminist perspective, the book represents a significant step forward in the field. It offers a comprehensive typology of responses and argues that feminist actors develop strategies of "productive resistance" against anti-feminism, focusing not on combatting anti-gender mobilisations, but on envisioning and enacting forward-looking agendas (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025, 15–16). By proposing the concept of "productive resistance", which describes proactive agenda-setting in response to anti-gender mobilisations, the book enables the field of (anti-)gender studies to progress beyond mere dismissal and rebuttal (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–256, 260–273).

3.2 Revisiting "backlash"

For the editors and authors, the seminal notion of "backlash" (Faludi, 1991), is both a starting point and an object of revision. Chapter 2 refines "backlash against gender politics" as a contextual descriptor, cautioning that anti-gender action is not always reactive and that progressive action is not always proactive. It foregrounds the co-constitution and resource asymmetries that shape strategic choice (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 27–28, 45, 47–48). The conclusion then critiques backlash narratives, which obscure the substantial content of the broader neoconservative project. Ultimately, the book rejects "backlash" as a simplistic, binary concept that focuses too much on what is attacked and too little on the construction of a neoconservative order, as well as on feminist and LGBTIQ* innovation (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 273–274).

This builds on research that criticised "backlash" as an inadequate framework for describing anti-gender politics, as it presents anti-gender movements as purely reactive and underestimates "the productive dimension of anti-gender ideology discourses" (Meneses Sala & Rueda-Borrero, 2024, 87). Previously, anti-gender backlash was defined as "counter-movements or counter-reactions and thus reactionary" (Escoffier et al., 2023; Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 6). However, scholars have argued that these mobilisations are not simply "anti" or "reactive" and have instead emphasised the "productive nature" of the anti-feminist movement, pointing out that they actively promote patriarchal family values and certain notions of sex, gender and nation (Serrano Amaya, 2017). Others have introduced terms such as "heteroactivism" and "heteropatriarchal activism" to describe these productive elements (Ojeda et al., 2024, 17). Shevtsova, for example, shows how heteroactivists "move from reactive to proactive positions" (2024, 92). The volume under review contributes to these debates by introducing the concept of "productive resistance" as a compelling non-reactive alternative to "backlash"-only narratives (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025, 260–261, 272–273).

3.3 Forward looking "productive" responses

The core of the book is the categorisation of empirical feminist phenomena as "productive resistance", which serves as a central analytical focus (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 15–16).

In line with the criticism of reactivity explained above, gender studies have also proposed readings of feminist responses that go beyond reactivity. In "Transnational Anti-Gender Politics", a conversation between Alia Amirali, Mauro Cabral Grinspan, Jules Gill-Peterson, Stella Nyanzi, and Haley McEwen stress the importance of moving beyond "resistance" when aiming for transformative politics (Amirali et al., 2024, 252). This encourages scholars and activists to "break free from these logics to come up with new vocabularies, ideas and modes of action" to "imagine otherwise", thereby expanding political imagination in ways that are both locally embedded and transnationally connected (ibid., 254). Following this line of thinking, Galán argues that these ideas should guide future research and activism on anti-gender politics (2025, 738).

The book's signature concept includes a clear definition of "proactivity": "A defining feature is limited direct engagement with anti-gender actors, with energies channelled into forward-looking policy work and coalition building" (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 263, 273). However, the title foregrounds the prefix "re-" in "responses" and "resistance", thereby signalling counteraction and reactivity. Therefore, the claim that productivity requires low reactivity may not seem intuitive at first. Nevertheless, the book's overall argument is well-grounded in the country cases fleshed out above that illustrate a shift towards forward-looking strategies with limited direct engagement (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–256, 260, 262–274). Alongside prior critiques of "backlash", this offers a convincing categorisation that will be useful to future empirical research.

All in all, the volume's central argument makes a significant contribution to the evolving field of (anti-) gender studies. Overall, the eight country case studies are rich in empirical detail, and the structure guides readers from context to comparative typology. This meaningful typology allows us to consider productive responses and resilience, and thus orient future research.

4. New avenues for future research agendas

Further research may build on and critically examine four key claims of the book. These are: first, the question of measuring changes over time and temporality; second, the relationship between "productive resistance" and interaction with anti-gender mobilisations; third, the antagonistic juxtaposition of action and reaction; and fourth, the normative restriction to reactions that are described as "feminist".

4.1 Change over time

The volume's central argument that feminist and LGBTIQ* movements are shifting towards "productive resistance" in response to anti-gender mobilisations (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025a, 14) is necessarily temporal. Empirically demonstrating such adaptation requires baselines, identifiable indicators and cross-time comparisons. Some chapters present clear before-and-after contrasts, while others are qualitatively persuasive but lack systematic temporal markers. The chapter on Italy offers the clearest time series: a baseline from the 2010s (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 25); organisational consolidation from 2013 (ibid., 32); a turn towards institutionalisation after the introduction of civil partnerships in 2016 (ibid.); tighter party alliances by 2018 (ibid., 33); and agenda placement after 2022 (ibid., 33–34). There are also documented shifts in venues, tactics, and outcomes such as the withdrawal of the Pillon Bill (ibid., 35–40). The chapter on Spain likewise provides transparent markers, including an increasingly feminist context by 2018 (Campillo et al., 2025, 107) and early coordinated mobilisation (ibid. 119–120, 127). After 2019, there was a Vox-driven shift to regional and judicial arenas, met with strategic avoidance and targeted protest (ibid., 120–126; 128–129). Other cases would benefit from designs that allow changes to be traced over time, thus strengthening the argument for forward-looking repertoires (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 260–261, 272–273).

Conceptually, however, there is a danger that measuring the adaptation over time as simply "before" (feminist) and "after" (anti-gender) reintroduces the linear temporality associated with "backlash" (Browne, 2013) – a framework that the book otherwise seeks to overcome. As Paternotte (2020) notes, backlash presupposes a "mechanical" linearity in which an action "almost automatically" triggers a counter-action. Decolonial scholars have pointed out that a central problem with the "backlash" narrative is precisely this inherent temporality; that the concept perpetuates a colonial interpretation of historical developments by repeatedly suggesting that anti-gender mobilisations originate solely in Europe, ascribing both feminism and anti-feminism outside Europe to a different temporality (Ojeda et al., 2024, 16; 22). Although the book touches upon this criticism by introducing the notion of "productive resistance", it could be further fleshed out, when it comes to temporality. Taking this critique seriously would mean defining "productivity" beyond a fixed linearity of "before" and "after" anti-gender mobilisation and measuring change over time accordingly. This would also allow the concept to travel to contexts outside Europe and to be compatible with decolonial thought.

4.2 Clarifying "productivity"

Empirically, several chapters derive "productivity" primarily from reduced direct interaction with anti-gender opponents. For example, the chapter on Italy highlights non-confrontational strategies such as accompanying women during abortions as productive, as direct interaction with opponents is minimal (Lavizzari et al., 2025,

40–45). However, if "productive" is equated with low engagement, this could lead to a possible mischaracterisation. Some chapters do not show clearly enough that the tactics are responses to anti-feminism and not examples of general feminist repertoires. Deriving the "productivity" of reactions to anti-gender mobilisations primarily from a low level of engagement with anti-gender opponents carries the risk of conflating opponent-specific counter-mobilisation with the advancement of a "regular" feminist agenda, blurring the boundary between "anti-anti-feminism" and "ordinary" feminism.

To sharpen the distinction between reactions to anti-gender mobilisations and feminist mobilisations, future research should specify the conditions that link "productive resistance" to anti-gender mobilisations rather than to disengagement per se. Limited direct engagement should remain an important criterion, but it should be complemented by additional criteria to define "productive" and forward-looking resistance. In that way, "productive resistance" could be further specified beyond the degree of engagement with anti-feminists.

4.3 Towards co-constitutive dynamics

The anthology begins with antagonism, namely "feminists and LGBTIQ*" versus "anti-gender" actors. However, if we take the book's critique of reactivity seriously, the same logic should also challenge a strict two-camp separation between the two. While the binary clarifies opposition, it obscures the mutual shaping, including shared vocabularies and tactical borrowing (Avanza, 2018; Corredor, 2019). Instead, a co-constitutive approach would consider the spaces in between, not just the opposites, and treat the field as a dynamic constellation of actors and connections, examining how interaction changes strategies, identities and repertoires for all involved (Fillieule & Broqua, 2020; Beck et al., 2023).

The volume has already demonstrated this in parts, albeit not yet with sufficient consistency. The Polish case is a good illustration: Muszel argues for mapping and including "gray zone" or "frenemy" actors. These include individuals (such as politicians, public figures and journalists) who publicly present themselves as neutral or mildly supportive of progressive causes, but who do not implement inclusive policies internally and undermine the efforts of the feminist movement. In other words, they are not openly hostile to feminist demands or LGBTIQ* rights; however, their actions, statements or lack of clear support can contribute to maintaining the status quo of inequality or perpetuating discrimination indirectly. According to Muszel, the challenge of the gray zone lies in its subtlety and the difficulty of mobilising against these ambiguous positions. Unlike overt opponents, whose positions are clear and can be directly challenged, dealing with "gray zone" actors requires nuanced strategies to expose the contradictions in their positions and encourage them to adopt more definitive supportive stances (Muszel, 2025, 180).

To further elaborate those ambivalent actors and the co-constitutive ways of "friend" and "enemy", future research could borrow from populism studies: The so-called "fifth-wave of populism studies" theorises the mutual shaping, the crossing of boundaries, and the diffusion of ideas between the mainstream and the extreme (Newth et al., 2025; Valentim, 2024). Research on the far-right models such co-constitution, demonstrating the dissolution of artificial barriers and discursive symbiosis, whereby mainstream authority amplifies radical narratives (Brown et al., 2023). When applied to anti-gender mobilisations, this shift would move the analysis beyond a two-camp framework towards co-production and fluidity. Specifically, it invites examination of when and how feminist and LGBTIQ* actors interact with reactionary entrepreneurs, which frames and tactics travel between them, and how institutional and media venues facilitate these exchanges. Operationally, this would mean further questioning actor overlap and frame appropriation.

4.4 Who responds?

The book deals with the eponymous "feminist responses". By "feminist response", the editors summarise feminist and LGBTIQ* movements' responses because they work closely together and are both attacked by anti-gender movements (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 12). Hence, the editors, a priori, single out responses to include in the volume on a normative basis.

However, following the above suggestion to take greater account of the co-constitutive paths, thinking beyond binaries, taking feminism as a starting point may be unintentionally self-limiting, while the book's criticism of reactive logics urges us to broaden our perspective. This is mainly for three reasons; empirically it is not so easy to distinguish between those who count as feminist and those who don't; conceptually, it may obscure the view of important ambivalent actors, as well as necessary alliances.

Assessing according to feminist criteria requires a "robust and context-specific definition of feminism" (Celis & Childs, 2018a, 20). However, much of the literature, including many chapters of this book, has highlighted the difficulty of identifying "feminist actors". For example, when feminist activists strategically downplay their feminist identity, as in the Italian case, they may adopt a "camouflage strategy" (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 44–45) and may be difficult to identify. Additionally, in times of blurring boundaries between feminist and anti-feminist actors, when "pro-life feminists" and "gender-critical feminists" appropriate feminist language while opposing feminist goals, self-identification as a feminist becomes an unreliable indicator (Farris, 2017; Calderaro, 2023). The French case illustrates this well. Anti-gender movements attempt to claim the legacy of feminism as their own, presenting themselves as the genuine protectors of women's rights (Pruvot, 2025, 82). The Italian case also discusses the complexity of the scenario of feminist responses, noting the presence of "gender-critical feminists" whose positions can sometimes

lead to "unintended convergences with far-right, populist, and anti-gender groups" (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 28).

Another reason for moving beyond "feminist responses" is that it could draw attention to the contributions of other actors to the pushback against anti-feminism. Writing about substantive representation, Celis and Childs (2018a, 20) have suggested to move beyond "judging all gendered representative claims against feminist ideological criteria" because it risks excluding other accounts of claims to substantively represent women's interests. This is why, literature on conservative feminism has asked us to take "conservative feminism" seriously (Celis & Childs, 2018b, 1–4). Moreover, reactions could also come from defenders of democracy; the chapters themselves point in this direction. In Turkey, for example, the defence of the Istanbul Convention was led by 77 bar associations, opposition parties, major trade unions, and business and professional organisations. These actors operate with legal, partisan, and corporatist mandates rather than explicitly feminist ones, and have not previously focused on feminist topics (Alnıaçık & Altan-Olcay, 144, 148–152). Furthermore, analysing responses to anti-feminism within the broader framework of democratic resilience would also speak to the claim made in the volume that "productive resistance" relies on functioning institutions, which are exploited and undermined by anti-gender actors (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 256–261).

A third reason would be to take into consideration the necessary alliances. The Italian case implies that, while feminist and LGBTIQ* actors are prominent and crucial in responses, a broader coalition of "progressive" actors, whether they identify as feminists or not, engaged in countering anti-gender movements (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 41–45). Similarly, Cattien has pointed out that responses to anti-feminism also come from potential intersectional allies, such as anti-racist activism, and that we should include those allies into our analyses (2023).

All in all, a more precise way to determine who is responding might be to go beyond normative labels, such as "feminism". Thus, one potential future research agenda could be to study reactions to anti-gender mobilisations leaving behind a narrow, normative understanding of feminist intentions, and instead including all actors in the analysis who are (potentially) implementing countermeasures and the conditions under which they do so.

5. Conclusion

The critical assessment of the volume *Anti-Gender Mobilisations in Europe and the Feminist Response: Productive Resistance* demonstrated that the book advances research in three significant ways: First, by focusing on the analysis of reactions, second, by critically rethinking the concept of "backlash" for analysis, and third, by offering a clear definition and typology of forward-looking, productive reactions on a continuum from low to high engagement with anti-gender actors.

Finally, it suggested that future research could develop four of the book's arguments further: First, it could align methodological approaches to study how responses to anti-gender mobilisations change over time, adopting a non-linear understanding of temporality. Second, it could sharpen the distinction between responses to anti-gender mobilisations and "regular" feminist mobilisations. Third, it could spell out "productive resistance", extending the productive logics that challenge the strict two-camp frame of feminists vs. anti-gender actors, and introducing a co-constitutive lens. Fourth, it could determine who responds, moving beyond normative assumptions.

Will the volume ultimately move us beyond the reactive ping-pong between feminists and anti-gender actors? Yes, particularly within the framework of social movement studies, and if the reactions originate from feminist or LGBTIQ* movements, assuming that it is clear who is considered a "feminist". This book will be of interest to scholars of women's and gender studies, sociology, and political science, as well as to practitioners and researchers concerned with responding to anti-gender mobilisations and strengthening LGBTIQ*-inclusive democracy.

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