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**Published version**

OBST, Marcel (2024). Not in the mood for gender and feminism. Exploring affect and expertise through Spanish anti-gender movements. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 104: 102892.

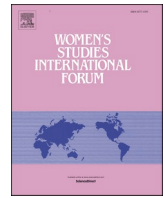
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# Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif)

## Not in the mood for gender and feminism. Exploring affect and expertise through Spanish anti-gender movements

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Anti-gender movements  
Gender ideology  
Spain  
Affect  
Experts  
Far right  
Antifeminism  
Extremism

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of affect in the study of anti-gender movements – a loosely connected network of actors that seeks political goals through their opposition to women's and LGBTQ+ rights and lives. Drawing on ethnographic data from Spain, it examines 'anti-gender' moods and the collective attunements that underpin these movements. Through this affective turn, it suggests that these moods can have profound binding and mobilising effects, capable of cultivating dynamics of *hateful love*; this is, anti-gender movements create spaces that nurture love for the perceived ingroup and simultaneously stoke hate towards the *Other*. The article suggests that *how* things are communicated is entangled with *what* is communicated, stressing the importance of the expert as a figure that contributes an authorising dimension to this mood of hateful love.

### Introduction

On a sunny winter morning, protesters started gathering at a well-known square in Madrid. They carried banners reading: 'Don't mess with my children', 'As parents we demand education free from gender ideology', and 'Our Children are Ours! For an education without indoctrination'. The word 'indoctrination' featured the colours of the rainbow flag, in reference to the LGBT(Q+) movement blamed for it all. Approximately 2000 participants joined the march, with one-third being children. The march set off and I walked beside it, starting to recognise some familiar faces: members of the ultra-Catholic campaigning group *HazteOír*, and someone I had recently spoken to at an anti-abortion action next to a clinic. The march was seamlessly organised, with formally dressed and somewhat intimidating security guards leading it at the front; at times, indicating what protesters should chant. On the sides, helpers wearing bright vests kept the group together. When the march approached the central Gran Vía, tension grew as passersby looked on in astonishment. Two women shouted '¡Put a vergüenza!' (Shame on you!) and a protester answered: '¡Hay que tener libertad!' (We must have freedom!). It was then that I realised I was part of the march when two participants handed me their phone and asked me to take a picture of them.

I could feel a mood of dissonance within the crowd, a dissonance between the group and disapproving passersby, which only increased through that very division. The closer the march got to the city centre,

the more people reacted to it and the more the group appeared to stick together. I felt misplaced, concerned about the tension with non-participants. I feared being hit if someone decided to throw an object at the group and ended up seeking refuge in its centre. Now my involvement felt even stronger, hidden in the midst of an outraged crowd.

The phenomenon of anti-gender movements, a loosely connected network of actors that seeks political goals through their opposition to women's and LGBTQ+ rights and lives, has often been studied from a distance (Obst & Ablett, 2024). Research has focused on the emergence, origins, funding, structures, and strategies of anti-gender movements, and theorised their very existence, making substantial contributions that have shed light on our understanding of these actors (Butler, 2024; Corrêa, Paternotte, & Kuhar, 2018; Datta, 2021; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Villa & Hark, 2017). I build on this work to explore the affective dimension of anti-gender studies through examples from my ethnographic engagement with these groups. An affective analysis can elucidate anti-gender movements to explain the state of being of its adherents, the formation of collectivity, and the creation of spaces where moods and reason merge seamlessly. Whilst moods and reason are often thought of separately, I draw on experts as prominent figures in anti-gender movements to suggest that beyond their image of carriers of emotionally undisturbed science, knowledge and reason, a deeply affective experience underlies and plays a vital role.

To argue for a turn to affect as a means to study anti-gender

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2024.102892>

Received 5 May 2023; Received in revised form 21 March 2024; Accepted 21 March 2024

Available online 8 April 2024

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movements, I draw on examples from ethnographic fieldwork in Spain. Whilst I do not offer a full account of how affect operates in this context, my contribution rather proposes affect as an analytical lens to explore anti-gender mobilising through localised examples (Obst & Ablett, 2024). I commence with a brief outline of anti-gender actors and their interrelation with the far right, focusing specifically on contemporary Spain. This leads me to a discussion of methodology, where I describe the field on which I draw to analyse moods, shaped through ethnographic research. I continue conceptualising affect and moods in relation to my fieldwork experience, arguing that anti-gender actors find themselves entangled in a paradigm of *hateful love*. This is, they perceive themselves to be loving, yet their cause ultimately relies on hate towards the *Other*. I then examine the 'expert' as a figure that has made repeated appearances in the field to provide the anti-gender movement with a deeply moving *raison d'être*, a catalyser for hateful love. Experts become, so to say, 'guardians', if not instigators, of an anti-gender mood.

### Anti-gender movements and the far right: the case of Spain

Anti-gender movements seek political goals by opposing women's and LGBTQ+ rights and lives; and beyond gender, for instance, to pursue wider neoconservative ambitions. On an institutional level, anti-gender movements are part of a process of de-democratisation at the hands of authoritarian projects, which themselves target not only gender and equality but also the ideal and the practice of democracy (Lombardo, Kantola, & Rubio-Marin, 2021). Both in and beyond institutions, these actors 'frame their own project as a moderate, commonsense one that protects natural sex roles and the relationship between family and nation' (Hemmings, 2021, p. 29), as they perceive themselves in very different terms to how they are seen from the outside. Despite anti-gender movements' transnational dimension, its analysis must inevitably go through the study of localised practices that make up such global phenomena, for example through the consideration of pivotal case studies. Here I am concerned with Spain, a case that will serve to propose looking into affect as a means of analysis. Spain has seen mass mobilisations against same-sex marriage as early as 2004 (Cornejo-Valle & Pichardo, 2017; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017), and witnessed the emergence of the international anti-gender campaigning platform CitizenGo. The platform is run by an ultra-Catholic advocacy group, primarily focused on opposing 'gender ideology', and has become a key player in international anti-gender mobilising.

After the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, Spain commenced an agitated and violent transition to democracy which was led by the Political Right (Urbán, 2019). Franco's apparatus remained largely intact after the transition (Ramos, 2021), and Spain became characterised by its future-looking tendency and silence over its past (Guamán, Aragonese, & Martín, 2019), despite the Spanish far right's nostalgic perspective towards Francoism. The *Partido Popular* (PP – People's Party) became the reference of the Right in the two-party system that dominated until the mid-2010s. The absence of a clearly far-right project in the Spanish party system has often been referred to as the 'Spanish exception', given that it was a unique case within Europe (Rodríguez Jiménez, 2012). However, the PP absorbed much of the far-right discourse and legacy, leaving no options for more radical right projects to emerge on a national level (Ramos, 2021). Although regionally a few far-right parties – including *Plataforma per Catalunya* (Platform for Catalonia) and *España2000* – and social movements – such as *Hogar Social Madrid* (Social Home Madrid) – existed, nationally it was not until the emergence of Vox in the 2010s that a far-right political party gained significant success.

During President Zapatero's government (2004–2011) of the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE – Socialist Workers' Party), the PP organised marches against same-sex marriage and the reform of the abortion law and led protests against more protection for women in gender-based violence cases or a progressive school subject on citizenship. The PP re-entered government in 2011 at the hands of President

Rajoy and made a failed attempt to cut back abortion rights. The party no longer tried repealing the same-sex marriage law, as it had been proven constitutional by the highest courts. The subtlety of the reforms left the party's more conservative sectors disillusioned (Alabao, 2021), leading to the creation of Vox in 2013. Initially, this party had little success but then unexpectedly gained 12 seats in the Andalusian parliament in 2018 under the leadership of former PP member Santiago Abascal. Vox mobilised a population disenchanted with the PP through a far-right discourse that followed many of the strategies seen elsewhere. It started drawing – more heavily than the PP – on ideas of national identity against Catalan independentism, and also focused on antifeminist and anti-gender strategies.

In their typology of anti-gender actors, Cornejo and Pichardo Galán (2017) identify far-right parties – mostly Vox – as one of the primary actors in the Spanish anti-gender landscape. Other key groups include the Catholic Church – which was visibly involved in anti-gender mobilising in the 2000s –, anti-abortion groups, and a neoconservative lobby mostly represented by *HazteOír*, the sister organisation of CitizenGo.<sup>1</sup> I draw on this landscape, with a specific emphasis on individuals who are more religiously inclined.

### Methodology

I conducted participant observation at a variety of events and eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews between September 2019 and May 2020. Most of my fieldwork took place in the city of Madrid, with occasional travel to other regions in Spain. Before and after events and interviews, I took fieldnotes that became the backbone of this study. The project received ethical approval from the University of Warwick (UK), participants signed a consent form and were given an information sheet about the project. All names have been changed and data has been anonymised.

The difficulties defining 'anti-gender' also troubles the identification of a field to immerse in as researchers, mostly because the term 'anti-gender' may be a useful analytical concept, yet the movement it aims to define is far less coherent than the term implies. I, therefore, approached the 'anti-gender' sphere as 'an almost random assemblage of sites that come into coherence through the processes of fieldwork itself: the field as deterritorialized and reterritorialized, as it were, by the questions brought to bear on it in the course of research' (Reddy, 2009, p. 90). I moved both between physical locations across the country, as well as 'ideological positionings or frames of reference' (Reddy, 2009, p. 90). My scope for events and participants was wide: I was prepared to talk to anyone supportive of one or more anti-gender causes, although I mostly focused on those situated on the Political Right.

Among the participants I spoke to were concerned participants or low-key activists – such as students, ultra-Catholic<sup>2</sup> event organisers, and civil servants – but also public-facing participants, such as MPs and social media influencers. There was a good balance between women and men, and vast differences in terms of religiosity, ranging from strictly religious laypersons working for the Church to people rejecting religion in its entirety. Politically, participants leaned towards the right and far right, yet some defined themselves as progressive, a position they however struggled with, given their support for a cause traditionally considered conservative.

In what follows, I draw out the role of moods through in-depth accounts of conversations with a few selected participants, and fieldwork

<sup>1</sup> The emergence of an online manosphere that uses non-traditional strategies adds another layer to this complex landscape. This groups deserves further attention but is not directly covered in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I use the term 'Catholic' and 'ultra-Catholic' to refer to a prevailing 'conservative' or 'traditional' form of Catholicism found in Spain. This strand of Catholicism often rejects key feminist demands and conceives the 'traditional' and 'natural' heterosexual family as the only possibility.

experiences, illustrating the affective dimension of anti-gender movements. Furthermore, my own involvement with the movements through extensive time spent with participants and at events inevitably leads me to in-depth reflections on my involvement as a researcher. These reflections portray how I grappled with the affective dimension of being in the field, experiencing moments of being in and out of tune.

### Tuning in and being out of tune.

As I was turned down to attend a course on 'gender ideology' for young Catholics, I wondered what it was that the professor leading it had not liked about me. I asked myself whether the fear and discomfort of interacting with the *Other*, the feeling of being out of tune was mutual, and wondered whether my introduction had produced discomfort for a reason unknown to me. This encouraged me to reflect on what allows one to tune in and what limits that attunement, a matter I will now explore further before introducing the concept of *hateful love*.

A valuable approach to exploring attunement in anti-gender movements involves attending events. Halfway through my fieldwork, I signed up for a talk organised by a regional bishopric, aimed at Catholic teachers concerned with 'gender ideology'. During the Q&A, worried educators asked practical questions on how to deal with the 'imposition' of 'gender ideology' in their schools. These concerns did not so much inhabit the individual bodies of those present but circulated around the room. Everyone appeared to have an example of precisely *that* which the speaker had addressed. The situation escalated rapidly, akin to a snowball growing into an unstoppable avalanche: teachers had come to the session with their worries to soon find themselves in a charged environment of shared anxiety. Each intervention contributed to and intensified the mood in the room. Some participants would add comments that turned into background noise, whilst others had yet another question for the speaker. It was as if *it*, *gender ideology*, had been evoked and stood there in the centre of the room. I sat in the middle row, observing quietly. My gaze swept across the room, discerning those who were raising questions and those who were chitchatting in their urge to comment on what was being said.

At the event, I was out of tune in my attempt to navigate the affective dimension of shared anxiety, a task that increases in complexity when looked at theoretically. The world of affect is often seen as taking the shape of emotions and moods, formed by competing theories that explain the relation between these categories. Some common features can however be drawn from the literature, in which emotions are regarded as more concrete states, which have a specific object. This is the case of anger: a person tends to be angry about something or someone. Moods are described as states that are more abstract and lack the specificity of an object. Felski and Fraiman (2012, p. v) characterise moods as 'ambient, vague, diffuse, hazy, and intangible'. They are often defined as an overarching state, a sense of how the world in its entirety is presenting itself to us. It is, so to say, our affective relation with the world; 'the way the world presents itself to us as "matters of concern" and matters to ignore' (Highmore & Taylor, 2014, p. 9).

However, in her seminal work on affect, the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2004, 2014a, 2014b) suggests that beyond the individual connection to the world, moods are also collective experiences. One may enter a particular mood, for example, when going into a room and *attuning* to, say, the cheerfulness of those present (Ahmed, 2014b). *Attunement* plays a crucial role in the process by which the mood of someone can be synced with that of others, being defined as 'the performance of behaviours that express the quality of feeling of a shared affect state' (Stern, 1998, p. 142). This explains the situation at the session for Catholic teachers, who came into the room with their own worries and were soon attuned to a wider mood that was constituted in that shared environment. The room acted as a catalyst for a mood of anxiety. This conceptualisation of mood relates to the philosopher Martin Heidegger's (1927) influential arguments in *Being and Time*, where he develops the German concept of *Stimmung* as a state that does

not come from within a person but in which one is rather caught up, making it interpersonal. The term translates into English with severe difficulty, as it refers to not only *mood* but also such things as *attunement* and *atmosphere*. Heidegger understands moods as a pre-cognitive tool that allows us to be in the world. We are therefore always in some sort of mood (*Gestimmt*), which can change but cannot disappear, as moodlessness is in-existent:

And because we never find ourselves nowhere, because we always already find ourselves somewhere specific, we are never not in a mood; to be in the world is to be in a mood. We find ourselves in moods that have already been inhabited by others, that have already been shaped or put into circulation, and that are already there around us.

(Flatley, 2009, p. 5)

Even though it appears that we are then mere passive inhabitants of our moods, Heidegger does account for some sort of intervention into the state of moods, claiming that one can 'master' moods through counter-moods. He does not provide much detail about how this would be achieved, but the idea has later been followed up through the translation of *Stimmung* as *attunement*, 'a word that readjusts our sense of mood by underscoring its relational aspect, its reference to our way of resonating or failing to resonate with others' (Felski & Fraiman, 2012, p. viii). Ahmed (2014b) reflects on the process of becoming 'out of tune' by imagining the earlier scenario of entering a cheerful room only to find that those present are making jokes one does not find funny or which are even offensive. She describes the affective disconnection that occurs as an embodied experience: '[m]y whole body might experience the loss of attunement as rage or shame, a feeling that can become directed towards myself (how did I let myself get caught up in this?)' (Ahmed, 2014b, p. 17). To return to the room of Catholic teachers, I too found myself feeling the attunement between them, yet out of tune myself, incapable of joining the mood. As the discussion in the room turned towards tools teachers could employ to neglect the needs of trans children at school, I felt aversion. Ahmed illustrates the enacting of a counter-mood as shutting ears and eyes, and she recognises that being attuned with one group – e.g., those excluded through anti-gender discourse – can mean being out of tune with another – e.g., the room of teachers worried about 'gender ideology'.

From a sociological perspective, moods become particularly interesting when related to actions, both because they might instigate particular behaviours or be a resulting cause. Via Heidegger's concept of counter-moods, Flatley reflects on the status of a revolutionary mood, to suggest that moods can change one's perspective and make some people, ideas or tasks appear more attractive than others.

[O]nly if I am in a fearful (or fearless) mood can I encounter something as threatening. Whatever my mood—whether it is irritable, eager, nervous, optimistic, depressed, confident, bored, or militant—some certain persons, objects, and memories will come into my affective view, and others will not. Some people will appear as friends and others as enemies, and some tasks will seem possible and attractive while others will not even enter the field of consideration.

(Flatley, 2012, p. 507)

To illustrate this, Flatley draws on the example of black workers in the late 1960s, who united in the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement to resist the poor and racist working conditions of a Detroit factory environment. Flatley describes how workers see their collective injury from the treatment they receive as strength to resist oppression, suggesting how a change in mood enabled them to move from feelings of isolation and alienation, towards taking action. After all, Price (2006, p. 56) suggests that both 'emotions and moods involve physiological changes, apparently designed to prepare the body for action'.

In the process of looking at the relation between action and moods, the apparent borderline with emotions is blurred, and Heidegger's clear-



cut differentiation between the two becomes less convincing. This is the reason why Solomon (1993) suggests a more fluid distinction that is open to potential overlap. He argues that although emotions are characterised by their narrow focus on specific objects and situations, moods are constructed on those very emotions and it can at times be difficult to tell them apart. Moving away from a rigid duality offers the benefit of studying the interrelation between emotions and moods but also recognising that the distinction between these two concepts can be useful analytically but does not necessarily reflect their complex functioning. In what follows, I focus on two moods that appear to stand out in the study of anti-gender actors: love and hate.

### Hateful love

In the formation of a mood of love for the anti-gender ingroup, this collective is presented with a conundrum: it has taken shape not so much in the light of a celebration of 'traditional' values but as an intervention into the lives (and bodies) of the *Other*. The ingroup perceives love as a binding element, but its existence is bound to the inevitable mood of hate that it is built on; even though it remains an open question whether hate can be considered a mood as such. Here, I am interested in the formation of such exclusionary moods, as they are involved in the creation of a collective feeling of *us* counterposed to the *Other*, and I argue that anti-gender movements can find themselves in a mood of *hateful love*.

To illustrate hateful love, I extensively draw on my conversation with Consuelo, a woman with a leadership role at the Catholic Church, who was invested in analysing the ills of 'gender ideology'. The interview exemplifies the recurring affective dimension as present among the more religiously inclined. In our conversation, she discussed 'people's fear to speak about these issues' and described them as 'feeling fear of being cast out, picked on or reported'. Consuelo often spoke in representation of the Catholic community, for example, when she described teachers and some parents as 'concerned' and 'invaded' by the imposition of 'gender ideology' in classrooms. That sense of 'invasion' came from a shared feeling of being deprived of 'free education', understood within the realm of 'traditional' Catholic values. Consuelo asked herself why it is no longer possible to speak freely, to defend freedom and democracy. In Ahmed's (2014a, p. 46) view, words like 'swamping' or 'flooding', and I would add 'invading', seek the generation of an affective effect, 'they create impressions of others as those who have invaded the space of the nation, threatening its existence'.

Consuelo couched her arguments within the recurring paradigm of 'rights', with the introduction of morals and ethics not perceived to meet Catholic standards into the school curriculum. The sense of a deserved right becomes something to fight for, without it ever being defined in concrete terms. In the following quote, Consuelo relates the 'pin parental' campaign<sup>3</sup> – seeking to limit progressive sex education – to a demand for rights:

[The parental pin] is something the Church and other institutions and organisations of parents have been working on to introduce conscientious objection in relation to certain school subjects, which they wanted to make mandatory, such as Citizenship Education, where the topic [gender ideology] was introduced transversally. Or which included other topics that somewhat aimed to indoctrinate or to educate with a certain moral or ethics. [...] There are many

<sup>3</sup> The *pin parental* (parental pin) is a campaign that has extended across Spanish-speaking countries to call for the right of parents to veto their children's participation in extracurricular activities. The main aim is to refuse participation in lessons covering sexual education, particularly topics relating to gender identity, feminism and sexual diversity. Pin is a metaphor for the PIN used to unlock devices such as mobile phones or to lock adult content on TVs. In Spain, the far-right party Vox and the ultra-Catholic campaigning platform *HazteOír* have been key promoters of the parental pin.

organisations which have emerged and which are on social and traditional media to say: join us! Let's write manifestos! Let's demand this right!

(Consuelo)

What Consuelo and the attendees at the earlier mentioned education event demand is the preservation of the privilege of 'traditional' Catholic family values and views on gender and sexuality, but given that these are seen as universal and natural, they necessarily remain unnamed. Hence, the justification soon gets entangled in the abstract dimension of a mood of loss that is defined as a well-intentioned and caring seeking of truth. Notably, love is at play, as anti-gender actors seek to protect their own in a perceived act of love to mobilise against the 'threat' of 'gender ideology'.

Exemplifying the love/hate dynamic, Ahmed (2014a) delves into the complexity of the justification that white supremacist groups use, presenting themselves as an overtly loving group towards their own kind, which is then injured through the threat of an outgroup that seeks to destroy their love. It is only then that hate appears, construed as being incited by the outgroup and existent only to protect the love of the ingroup. This is perhaps better explained through Ahmed's concept of *affective economies*, which describes how emotions align individuals and bring them together into groups, but do so even whilst situating themselves against others. Ahmed looks at this idea from the perspective of race, exemplifying her argument with an extract from a white supremacist group.

[The subject] is presented as endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject. In other words, the presence of these others is imagined as a threat to the object of love. The narrative involves a rewriting of history, in which the labor of others (migrants, slaves) is concealed in a fantasy that it is the white subject who 'built this land.' [...] The narrative hence suggests that it is love for the nation that makes the white Aryans hate those whom they recognize as strangers, as the ones who are taking away the nation and the role of the Aryans in its history, as well as their future.

(Ahmed, 2004, p. 117)

Similar to how white subjects in Ahmed's example assert ownership of land, anti-gender actors stake their claim over a sex and gender regime, adamantly refusing to cohabit in a society that presents itself as more diverse. Ahmed is indeed not the only one who has analysed the complexity of a perceived *mood of love* within the ingroup, which simultaneously justifies a *mood of hate* against the outgroup (though always in the name of *love*). In discussing the context of the Swedish extreme right, Mulinari and Neergaard (2014) propose the term *care racism* to address a pattern that works in a similar fashion. By claiming to care for 'our own', these groups promote the exclusion of the racialised *Other*. However, they take an additional step to suggest that 'caring racism facilitates being an exclusionary racist by formulating it as a form of caring for the racialised other' (2014, p. 52). Put differently, the far right argues that they do not only care for 'their own' but also for the *Other* in that they believe in the good they would do 'by sending them back to their "true" home' (2014, p. 52). A similar logic applies to anti-gender manifestations around education, such as the 'parental pin' campaign: proponents declare to be worried for the well-being of (and love for) children; those of their own and those of others.

It is often the case that groups that spread hate do not regard themselves as doing so. In fact, anti-gender actors accuse feminists and LGBTQ+ communities of being hateful. This was the case with Rocío – an employee of an ultra-Catholic organisation –, who throughout our interview insisted on the hate that feminists feel in their process of 'destroying society'. Our conversation had been revolving around fear, but Rocío was certain that it was not fear but hate that moved feminists; she exemplified this by recalling the acts of the activist group Femen and

their topless protests:

What feminazis feel, when for example they get naked in front of a Church, is hate. That can't be fear. It's the other way round, we should fear them because they're in such a foul mood that you feel like running away, you see? [...] This 'freeing' feminism wants freedom... I mean homosexuality, transsexuality, divorce, all sorts of family roles: two fathers, two mothers, a father and a dog, whatever you like! Anything goes. So, it's hate. Nothing but hate.

(Rocío)

Feminists or 'feminazis' are considered the bearers of the hate. Just as Ahmed described a group of white supremacists regarding themselves as loving protectors of their white compatriots, Rocío evokes a mood of love and care for her own, defined against the feminist outsider. In our conversations, both Rocío and Consuelo described the opposition they see between Catholicism and feminists/'LGBT lobbyists'. Put differently, our conversations were the expressions of a wider mood that divides socially conservative views in Spain from those that are more progressive. It is therefore unsurprising that the sociologist Kathleen Blew (2003), who has extensively studied racist actors in the USA, noticed that many of her participants became more hateful after joining white supremacist movements, likely because those groups nurture hate. In hating *them* whilst simultaneously accusing *them* of hate, Rocío both manifests her belonging to the ingroup and continues to preserve its boundaries. She is both part of the origin and the continuation/survival of the ingroup.

The hateful love dynamic must not necessarily be true only for anti-gender movements, the far right or hate groups, given that a certain despise of the *Other* that defines an ingroup may emerge elsewhere. However, the constitution of anti-gender as being always *against*, whilst sceptical of defining the gendered regime they stand for, makes the love/hate dynamic particularly interesting. Anti-gender groups nurture their love through hate, and without the latter, they would cease to exist as such. The affective hateful love is exacerbated through experts, key players acting as guardians of moods and providing the movement, at least seemingly, with a rhetoric that binds it.

### Experts as guardians of moods

After a few events and interviews, I had heard most of the argumentative repertoires that were circulating across anti-gender spheres: accusations against gender-based violence legislation, the perception of unfair treatment of men, or the urge to protect children from sex education. Adding to this preoccupation with feminism and gender, Hemmings (2021, p. 32) argues that "anti-'gender ideology' mobilisations are suffused with violence and a sense of entitlement, and yet their aggression is deflected through the logic of naturalised sex difference as under threat". In light of this, I became interested in how anti-gender narratives are crafted: stories in which the actual content was not necessarily as important as the mood it was capable of generating. It is what Hemmings (2021, p. 32) has called *affective fictions*, logics showing that 'feelings do not need to be "true" to be powerful'.

The narratives that impregnate anti-gender spheres show the merging of reason and science into the affective. In my fieldwork, experts emerged as carriers of that intersection, as they repeatedly headlined roundtables and conferences, but were also drawn on in conversations. Whilst a common understanding of 'experts' aligns with the dictionary definition of people 'with a high level of knowledge or skill relating to a particular subject or activity' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022), 'expertise' is more complex, in that its legitimisation takes place within a particular system of knowledge production. Stambolis-Ruhstorfer (2020, p. 3) shows that 'access to power, such as symbolic and materials resources including funding, disciplinary recognition, or professional promotion are unevenly distributed'. This suggests that beyond the degree of expertise of a particular person, the fact that they are situated within a system of legitimisation means that the validating role experts play does

not necessarily equal their degree of expertise.

As the feminist ethnographer Maria do Mar Pereira (2017) shows, feminism has precisely called into question the dynamics by which knowledge production is legitimised and by which epistemic status is ascribed or denied to particular disciplines, with Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies (WGFS) often an example of a discipline under scrutiny. Whilst the degree of marginalisation and undermining of WGFS depends on a variety of factors, including complex power dynamics (Pereira, 2017), anti-gender movements have benefitted from, and contributed to, the questioning of WGFS and particularly Gender Studies. In fact, Petö (2016, p. 298) notes that anti-gender movements have changed Gender Studies across national contexts because 'politicians and public intellectuals without any knowledge or training in gender studies are making unquestionable public statements on professional issues such as sex education or the science curriculum'. Anti-gender 'experts' subsequently utilise those narratives to advance their own affective crusade against 'gender ideology'.

However, my focus here lies not so much on how anti-gender movements seek to invalidate knowledge production in the academic field of Gender Studies, but on arguing that anti-gender movements establish their own parallel ecosystem of 'experts on gender' as legitimising voices. The intellectual authority of these 'experts' is eminently partisan and does not depend that much on scholarly debate as on creating apparent scientific discourse that contributes to moods of hateful love. It is the 'expert's mere presence that bestows the movement with legitimacy and shifts the Overton window towards two seemingly equally defensible positions: gender/anti-gender, feminism/antifeminism, an argument I will now explore in more detail through in-depth engagement with a talk by a Catholic professor of law, the speaker at the earlier mentioned talk at a regional bishopric.

The talk was designed to help attendees navigate the 'dangers' of gender and sexuality as educational challenges for children. On the day, I walked through a stunning ancient building towards a large conference room, decorated with portraits of the regional bishop and the Pope. I occupied a middle-row seat, observing animated conversations as people were coming in. About eighty people attended, and over 60 % were women. Most appeared to be in their 40s, 50s or 60s, with only a handful of younger attendees. After some time for everyone to arrive, the speaker and organiser took their seats on the podium, behind a massive wooden table. The organiser presented the event as inspired by a newly released document on gender by the Vatican, and then introduced the speaker as an expert on the matter. The event lasted two hours and the speaker insisted on dedicating sufficient time to answering the questions of the attendees, who expressed their worries about the treatment of abortion and anti-LGBT hate laws in the classrooms of government-funded schools, but also sought specific advice on how to deal with gay and trans children. The speaker provided a variety of tools to refuse addressing trans children by their desired name, or to avoid the teaching of sex education content that he believed to go against Catholic values. Notably, the speaker wielded authority by virtue of his professorial standing, bolstered further by his confident demeanour, formal attire, and even the gesture of inviting attendees to address him informally. At the beginning of his talk, he used his introduction to define himself as 'Catholic, Apostolic and Roman', an expression demonstrating not only a strong alliance with the Catholic Church but indicating that his take on Catholic values was a strictly conservative one.

The central argument of the speaker's talk turned on the analysis of various stages to describe the impact 'gender' was having in Spain. According to him, what starts with a 'harmonious' stage before 2003, a time when all individuals are seen to be legally protected from violence, turns into a steady introduction of laws that at first aim to protect minorities whose suffering the population is compelled to feel sorry for. As further legislation is rolled out, the speaker argues that the educational inclination of laws seeks to normalise what was initially thought of as an exception. He exemplifies this with legislation on abortion and same-sex marriage to demonstrate the increase that occurs through its legal

permission. The speaker then argues that the trend continues beyond normalisation and what is a norm soon becomes an obligation. For instance, we now must find 'being gay' tolerable or face sanctions, leading to a limitation of free speech under the name of 'anti-discrimination'. He then raises some rhetorical questions asking if we cannot express *our* standing against non-reproductive sexual 'options', or if we must face accusations of homo and transphobia just because we want the right to choose that our children are taught the 'natural' family.

To conclude his argument, the speaker lightens up the room citing a meme he had come across, something along the lines of: 'In the 70s being homosexual was frowned upon. In the 80s it started to be allowed. In the 90s it was viewed favourably. I hope to die before it becomes mandatory!'. Laughter fills the room and offers a moment of release from the anxiety that sits, as [Pereira \(2017\)](#) describes it, 'in the air'. The speaker was contributing to a mood which spread beyond individual attendees to the point of becoming a 'collective, communal and contagious feeling' ([Pereira, 2017](#), p. 187) of despair vis-à-vis the perceived threat of gender and sexuality taking over the 'natural' formation of family and society. There was a feeling of legitimacy: for once attendees felt heard in their desire to stop a sexual rights movement that was perceived to invade their space of 'normality', and hinder them from educating children with their 'traditional' Catholic-grounded beliefs.

In his narrative, the speaker creates a nostalgic framework that imagines a better past projected into the future. It is [Bauman's \(2017\)](#) *retrotopia* – a means to go back to the future – put into action through the demarcation of what is perceived as a dangerous age of 'anti-discrimination' legislation. The speaker wishes for a past time to return in the future, as he describes the pre-2003 state of the law as a time of 'harmony' because it protected from violence without differentiating who was at the receiving end of it. He appears to have established this period as desirable, appealing to a form of *restorative nostalgia* ([Boym, 2001](#)) that seeks to recover what is perceived as lost. His narrative establishes a connection with how individuals could be negatively affected. The stages set out that something that we could initially agree with in principle, the protection of extreme cases of discrimination, soon turns into a normalised standard or an obligation, which interferes with *our* rights. It is the trigger that is needed for *it*, the gender stuff, to be turned into a matter that affects all of *us*. This then draws the audience's attention to a form of accelerated social decay that not only encourages a form of anxiety but is also an invitation to act. The consecutive stages represent a steady worsening of the situation, which once was harmonious and now endangers the very existence of the 'normal'. The speaker suggests that his joke on homosexuality becoming mandatory is laughable now, as an abhorrently ridiculous idea, but we shall not lose sight of what could come if no action is taken.

The speaker presents the audience with a timeline of a thoroughly planned evolution in which Spanish law is misused to disguise the alleged dismantling of morals around gender and sexuality. What is framed as LGBT rights, the speaker argues, is in fact a strategy to not only promote 'non-reproductive sexual options' but to sanction whoever disagrees. The speaker's unpacking of anti-discrimination legislation appears to be an attempt to promote religiously-inflected ideas around the 'natural' and the 'traditional family' under the guise of an objectively-presented sociological analysis of the law. It is an essential element of the counter-narratives opposing sexual citizenship which [Kuhar \(2015\)](#) has identified, and which have had an impact on legislation in other national contexts, such as Russia, Hungary and Croatia. Kuhar shows how secularised discourse draws on studies that appear to use a scientific method to demonstrate the unsuitability of non-conforming sexualities and gender identities. When the scientific method is rather dubious, as [Kuhar \(2015\)](#) suggests in his analysis of a case study, I argue that what remains is the legitimising force of the expert *per se*, rather than the actual knowledge produced. This occurs in the case of the speaker: regardless of the extent to which the audience is prepared to take the speaker's argument on board, his authority bestows the event with an air of science, as he suggests from a position of expert

authority that Spanish society has been fooled through the implementation of ever-worsening legislation that has limited ordinary citizens' rights.

In light of the function experts perform beyond their intellectual contributions, [Stambolis-Ruhstorfer \(2020, p. 3\)](#) identifies what he calls 'expert capital': 'Activists and decision-makers mobilize experts' knowledge, making expert capital a form of objectified cultural capital' in Bourdieu's terms, and seeking to participate in debates through 'experts' perceived legitimacy'. During the educational event, attendees looked up to the speaker and could not avoid addressing him formally as 'professor', despite him clarifying repeatedly that he wished for a more horizontal discussion. The speaker had been conferred the role of expert on the concerns the audience had brought to the room and he therefore fulfilled the role of providing legitimacy, but also of giving practical advice to the questions the audience came up with.

If in the first instance expert capital provides legitimacy to an anti-gender cause, it also serves the purpose of solidifying the ties of a dispersed social movement through the sharing of a mood. That is, if an anti-gender event is organised, attendees are likely to find attunement in the space through their sharing of a common cause. Experts are key figures in the nurturing of that mood, making it at times less significant *what* is being said than *how* it is being communicated and *how* it contributes to the feeling in the air. Technically, experts could break the attunement or create agitation, because they have been given a platform validated through their position in society. In practice, however, their function appeared to be to sustain an anti-gender mood. This was the case at the speaker's talk, but also on other occasions in which an almost identical idea – of gender as social decay that is making its way into the system through the law – was defended. This occurred at a book presentation on the 'business' of feminism by a lawyer and former Vox MP, which I attended at *HazteOir's* headquarters. Similarly, a conference convened by a group of conservative organisations delved into the intersection of 'gender ideology' and law, aiming to explore the legal, educational, and social ramifications associated with this concept. In all these cases, what is sought is a mood capable of countering Spain's introduction of women's and LGBTQ+ rights since the end of the dictatorship. Accordingly, the professor's analytical reflection was not so much a contribution to science as it was a contribution to the emotional state of the room. In fact, it was his intervention that brought people together, and in that very coming together a particular mood was created through a temporality of decay that moves from a harmonious past towards a future of degeneration. Notably, the rhetoric sits within a framework of hateful love, establishing the borders of love towards the own community through hate towards the *Other*.

To recall [Highmore and Taylor \(2014\)](#), if moods help to differentiate matters of concern from those that can be safely ignored, the expertise provided at the event provides reassurance to participants that their beliefs on gender and sexuality rightly cause anxiety. Yet, besides the role of the expert, there is another element that contributes to the air of science: the material location in which the expert is invited to speak. The size of the room, the large wooden chair, the podium, and the antique furniture, all contributed to the feeling of significance of the event I was about to witness as I entered the space. Following [Pereira \(2022, p. 4\)](#), spaces can also have an authorising effect, with credibility deriving from the source – the expert – but being conferred through a physical space, inducing 'affective experiences' that impact negotiations of epistemic status.

*HazteOir* has mastered the strategy of using experts to reinforce perspectives which further their cause whilst employing material resources to fabricate a significant media presence, resulting in the creation of a counter-mood that opposes the *Other*. Their headquarters are situated in a rather unappealing building in a middle-upper-class residential area in northern Madrid, serving both *HazteOir* and *CitizenGo*. When I attended my first event there, I followed a resident through the gates and entered a small reception area with a few chairs. I was asked for my name, given that registration in advance was mandatory. Some



people had already arrived for an event on the 'pin parental'. I sat down and browsed through some of the leaflets, all remarkably well-designed and printed in full colour. After a few minutes, attendees were invited to take a seat in the conference room next door. It was not particularly big but had enough space for about thirty chairs, a couch area, a coffee table on the side and, most importantly, a white curved table for speakers to sit at. Behind the table, two screens advertising the event and used for presentations seamlessly merged into the wall. In the corner hung a large Spanish flag. The space looked more like a large apartment, being much smaller than I would have imagined, but it was well-kept and designed not so much for the audience in the room as for an online presence. Given that the event was going to be broadcast live over Facebook, four large cameras had been placed in the room and presenters wore small microphones. There was an institutional feeling to it, something making the not-so-big room look more important through what seemed like cutting-edge technology, bright spotlights on the ceiling and a lectern.

Beyond the evidence of considerable funding going into the set-up of *HazteOír*'s headquarters, the room demonstrated a design aimed at bestowing an air of science to events. *HazteOír* had sought to enlarge the significance of their acts through a set-up that would overcome their small and remote premises through the attempted similarities with an auditorium, particularly for those who would not be in the room themselves. This was also the case for the conference on 'gender ideology' and the educational event in the bishopric, which respectively used a massive modern auditorium and a large conference room in an ancient building. Both were filled at less than half of their capacity, yet allowed for a feeling of authority, credibility and significance. The set-up bestowed the 'expert' voices invited with an institutional feel that may have done more to further their anti-gender cause than the actual content of their narratives.

## Conclusions

Looking at anti-gender movements through an affective lens provides insights into what at first seems ungraspable, elements which go beyond rhetoric, funding and mobilisation efforts. Whilst moods may appear overly abstract, it is important to consider their practical nature. As Caballero (2021) suggests, even though Vox refrains from openly inciting violence, the party's discourse contributes to creating a climate in which extremist followers may feel legitimised to commit hate acts; a reminder of the intrinsic relation between anti-gender moods and the impact they can have on the lives and bodies of women and LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as other societal groups. I hence propose to apply an affective lens to anti-gender movements, interrogating how they are entangled in their relationship with themselves and the *Other* through hateful love.

By immersing myself physically and emotionally in the Spanish field, I have been faced with the limits of my own disapproval of anti-gender actors. I have empathised with participants on a human level, akin to the affective experience of the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's (2016) with voters of the Tea Party in the USA. I share not so much *what* they believe, but *how* they feel about it. The affective exploration of these groups hence opens possibilities to shed light on the shared fear and anxiety around anti-gender, which create forms of attachment and bonding. But it also reveals that what from the outside appear to be hateful narratives with potentially serious consequences might, from the inside, be perceived as an act of love for the *us*, in protection from that *Other*. Furthermore, in turning to affect I have argued that *how* things are communicated is entangled with *what* is communicated, as an anti-gender narrative is built upon the powerful bonding that alterity allows for. The 'expert' enjoys a prominent role in this dynamic, whereby anti-gender movements mobilise their own 'gender' expertise to headline conferences, talks, seminars, and speeches. Beyond the expert's message, it is their presence that bestows the movement with legitimacy. Epistemologically speaking, the lack of rigour in the expert's use of the scientific method (Arguedas Ramírez, 2020; Kuhar, 2015) – and

therefore in much of the anti-gender argumentative repertoire – demonstrates that their role is not so much to provide scientific reassurance, as it is to contribute to the creation of a mood. After all, moods are those elements of social relations that are always present – recalling Heidegger's claim that we are always in some form of mood.

When anti-gender experts nurture a nostalgic narrative of gender as decay, this is couched in hateful love, two opposing moods that bounce off each other. Love for the perceived ingroup is sustained through the encouragement of hate towards the *Other*. Affective spaces emerge, shaped through elements that entangle narratives and discourse with the authorising effect of expertise and space itself, but also through identity, temporality, knowledge, emotion, and everyday interactions. Pertinently, Hemmings (2021, p. 4) reminds us that feelings can emerge in the form of affective fiction, as '[a]nti-gender discourse hinges on a utopian fantasy of a bankrupt present and future'.

Notably, however, these spaces of hateful love need not be physical nor do individuals necessarily perceive the ingroup in the same way. To return to my earlier definition, the disparate boundaries that delineate what constitutes the ingroup and the *Other*, are a reflection of the anti-gender field being a loosely connected network of actors. Even though moods offer a binding function, vast differences exist among those individual actors. The idea of an 'ingroup' itself meets the concept's limits as it fails to establish neatly enough what anti-gender actually is. The term 'anti-gender' becomes useful for analytical purposes, yet fails to fully embrace the complexity of what it seeks to define: a landscape ranging from far-right political parties to religious anti-abortion activism, to transphobic feminism. Yet, whilst not all actors defend the same causes, and moods can take different shapes, moods can also offer a fascinating angle into explaining the apparent synergies, paradoxes, and contradictions across the political spectrum. Anti-gender actors are thus simultaneously diverse and contradicting, as they are capable of attuning, as Sara Ahmed puts it, to shared moods and affective experiences.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Marcel Obst:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Maria do Mar Pereira for her invaluable feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. My gratitude also goes to Dr. Sivamohan Valluvan and to the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive input.

The research for this article was funded by the ESRC (UK) under grant number ES/P000771/1.

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