

Anti-Genderismus and right-wing hegemony

Eva von Redecker

After incidents of pickpocketing and sexual harassment were reported to have taken place at the New Year's Eve festivities in Cologne and Hamburg, and been associated with perpetrators of North African descent, public discourse in Germany turned blatantly racist.¹ This seemed to stand in stark contrast to the relatively broad pro-immigration consensus of the previous autumn, to the welcoming attitude of volunteer initiatives helping Syrian refugees and to the fact that even tabloids such as *Bild* had previously criticized the humanitarian cost of the EU border regime. 'After Cologne', however, widespread sexual panic was ubiquitously articulated and provided the reference point for a mood swing against immigration, accompanied by an increase in racist attacks.

The cover of the conservative magazine *Focus* from 9 January more or less sums up the ingredients of the 'new' reactionary discourse. The magazine's front page, available at every newsstand, showed the naked torso of a white, blonde woman, with black handprints on it and a banner reading 'Are we still tolerant or already blind?', along with the caption 'What really happened in Cologne'. As sudden as their proliferation seemed, the motifs used here are long-standing and well-documented by anti-racist scholarship. The most obvious is the racist trope of black men as a threat to defenceless white women, as hyper-sexualized or 'unrestrained'.² In the German context, this also revives one strand of sexualized discourse which was originally anti-Semitic in content. Both Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* obsess about male Jews' supposed compulsion towards sexual criminality.³ A cover of *Der Stürmer* dating from February 1930, for instance, displays some striking analogies to the *Focus* one. Subtitled 'Truth on the cross', it presents a picture of a naked white woman being bound to a cross, with many enlarged hands of anti-Semitic caricatured figures reaching for her. In both images, a naked white woman's body simultaneously stands for the German nation and the truth, allegedly under attack from liberal media, state institutions and racialized men.

One of the levers which allowed for the successful mobilization of drastically reactionary and racist discourse is *Anti-Genderismus*, 'anti-genderism': the resentful mobilization against pluralism and 'political correctness', which are perceived as instituted by 'gender ideologues'. The *Focus* cover derives its emphasis from an allusion to tolerance equalling blindness and the need to unveil what really happened. At the same time, by suggesting that it is women who are doing the accusing, the magazine's designers try to seal themselves against feminist critique – never mind the objectifying picture of their faceless 'cover girl'.

Anti-genderism resonates with fascist anti-liberal critiques of Weimar culture⁴ and has over the last decade fostered alliances between right-wing positions which would

otherwise be incommensurate. Not incidentally, it also targets and weakens exactly that body of critical knowledge which would promise insightful diagnoses of what Europe is faced with politically at the moment: the mutual reinforcement of racism and sexism, the acceleration of political polarization driven by sexualized fantasies, the ideological construction of pure and homogenous societies by part of the population, and the diversion of attention from many important political problems by a pseudo-pornographic focus on a few disconnected issues.

From the Vatican to Pegida

It seems spurious that a poorly funded branch of research with marginal academic standing should come to be seen as the reigning 'ideology', as a force destructive of a national culture, or, likewise, as terroristic or totalitarian.⁵ Yet those are the categories in which Gender Studies, as well as policies and political activism suspected of being guided by its insights, have now been branded for several years in the French and German public sphere.

While in some ways in clear continuity with long-standing misogynist and anti-feminist sentiments, anti-gender discourse is distinct in that it projects a different enemy. Not women, or free and strong women per se, but a vague conspiracy of elitist academics and policymakers serves as the target. This makes anti-genderism even seem compatible with feminism, where feminism is understood as respect for women's difference, a strong emphasis on motherhood and, most importantly, an achievement distinguishing the West from the rest. This obviously resonates neither with the current feminist movement nor with feminist theory, but it grants the

reactionary position a self-legitimizing feedback loop. Moreover, by not being explicitly directed against women or minorities – but against an agenda ascribed to them – the hatred fuelling anti-genderism is obfuscated. 'Gender', used as an untranslated English term in German and as a new sense for *genre* in French, precisely by sounding 'foreign' and vague, allows for all sorts of projections. When, however, the anti-gender coalition has singled out somebody as the personification of the term – Professor Tuider, a co-editor of a German anthology discussing progressive sexual education, for instance, or Professor Lann Hornscheidt, who specified her preference for gender-neutral address on her university home page – the violence articulated could not be more personalized and crude. It focuses on lesbian and genderqueer appearance, and ranges from death and rape threats via Internet forums to an open letter addressed to the president of Humboldt University which asked for Professor Hornscheidt's removal.⁶



It was initially a Vatican policy to channel all discontent with emancipatory and secular human rights discourse into a rejection of the category of gender. The conflict along these lines first surfaced at the 1995 UN Women's Conference in Beijing. In 2000 the Vatican coined the term 'gender ideology' to articulate its opposition.⁷ The polemical term 'genderism' was then brought up in German neo-Nazi contexts. In a first wave of self-declared 'anti-genderism' between 2006 and 2008, many of the themes now surfacing in broader debates were initially discussed in the extreme right-wing newspaper *Junge Freiheit* as well as on a neo-Nazi Internet platform entitled 'free gender – abolish gender-terror'.⁸ The still prevalent misunderstanding

that gender-mainstreaming follows an agenda to abolish gender (rather than paying attention to the gendered impact of policies), originated in this context and was elaborated by Christian fundamentalist thinkers. The latter often combined their denunciation of progressive gender politics with outdated anti-communist rhetoric, portraying feminism as a conspiracy to create a new, genderless human who would be easily malleable by the European administration in particular.⁹

In Western Europe it was the French movement *Manif Pour Tous* which effected a breakthrough in terms of anti-gender publicity. Perceived mostly as a protest movement against gay marriage, the platform also explicitly organized events directed against Gender Studies and its alleged impact on education and society. Their mobilization, which outnumbered the demonstrations of May '68, and their mutual reinforcement with the Front National's right-wing populism, made them a model not only for protests against progressive sex education in Germany,¹⁰ but also for the organization of the anti-immigrant movement Pegida and the party popularized in its wake, the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland). Interestingly, one of the very few points on Pegida's position paper which is formulated negatively and the only one using pejorative terms openly is the entry about gender: 'Pegida is against this insane "gender-mainstreaming", often also called "genderization", and against the nearly compulsive, politically correct gender-neutralization of our language.'¹¹ While the AfD in general tries to fashion itself as less extremist than its Pegida support movement, its statements about education and family policy fall into precisely the same register, equating gender mainstreaming with an anti-democratic, EU-orchestrated agenda to 'abolish gender identity'.¹²

There is little else that such different groups as conservative Catholics, evangelical Christians, neo-Nazi gangs, masculinist Internet trolls, nationalists of different European countries, populist right-wing parties and their rabid activist wings could agree on so ardently. Anti-genderism is of unique importance to a right-wing hegemonic project. On this terrain, all those different reactionary camps display the same fervour and use the same rhetoric. It gives them a common default while they differ diametrically on questions such as religion, social policy and the role of the state. It also creates a shared ground on which the racist and anti-immigrant propaganda of those various groups is situated in such a way that the most extreme positions do not seem isolated and absurd but are taken to reflect nothing more than the ultimate point of a perceived continuum. And this continuum, if we measure it as coextensive with the reach of anti-genderism, is not one spanning only a margin populated by disenfranchised fanatics. Respectable newspapers like *Die Zeit*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* repeatedly run 'investigations' or 'portraits' of Gender Studies which recycle their enemies' conspirational logics and absurd allegations in a fashion unthinkable in relation to any other academic topic or journalistic standards in general. Just as sex sells, 'anti-gender' grips attention.

Anti-genderism as a defence mechanism

Some commentators have suggested avoiding the term 'anti-genderism' since it perpetuates the assumption that there is such a thing as 'genderism'. They instead speak of 'discourses against equality politics and gender studies'.¹³ While they clearly have a point, this reference fails to capture the phobic and conspiracy-theoretical overtones characteristic of anti-genderism. An alternative analytical option is to sever the representational pretence, reading anti-genderism not as opposition to an alleged 'genderism' but as the name for a specific psycho-social defence mechanism. Prejudices or phobias gain their shape from their holders, not their victims. Thus, as the psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl stresses, the 'same' prejudice can appear in several forms according to the character type entertaining it – as defence of hysterical,

obsessive and narcissistic personalities alike.¹⁴ Anti-genderism seems to lend itself particularly to such adaptations. We can encounter it in masculinity turned hysterically violent at the threat of its own instability, in the obsessive paranoia of those who try to secure the 'purity' of a natural gender order as well as the 'innocence' of children against the filthy influence of 'gender terrorists', and in the aggression at the sight of too much intellectual 'meddling' with the established foundations of patriarchal hierarchy.

The individual conditions of those psychopathological responses might be myriad; but the very mechanism of defensiveness as such characterizes strikingly well the structural features of anti-genderism's proponents. For example, sociologists Christine Wimbauer, Mona Motakef and Julia Teschlade have recently presented an analysis which argues that anti-gender discourse is an attempt to regressively come to grips with experiences of precarity. Gender studies and politics, according to their diagnosis, are blamed in order to rationalize losses of control and security effected mostly by economic factors.¹⁵ Additionally, it is important to highlight the symbolic level of precarization, especially given that the new right-wing populism is finding much support among all ranks of society and is in large part a middle-class phenomenon. In a way, anti-genderism tries to defend those ideological formations which otherwise offer validation for privileged identities and a refuge from dire economic circumstances – ideological formations which Gender Studies, with its focus on historicizing and deconstructing the structures that are taken for granted, is indeed intent on destabilizing.

Seeing anti-genderism as a discursive cluster functioning as a defence mechanism defines it as something other than a full-blown ideology. Ideologies can be defined as orientations – both cognitive and practically embodied – which veil and facilitate the most prevalent problems and forms of domination of their day.¹⁶ Sexism or heteronormativity, racist geopolitical and national imaginaries, neoliberal invocations of creativity, as well as the moralizing of debt in austerity politics, are candidates for such overarching structures. Anti-genderism, it seems, stands at a particular angle to such ideological conglomerates: it stabilizes ideologies which are already partly out of sync with the core institutional mechanisms of the present. More precisely, it serves as an immunization against the critique of certain ideologies. Sexism, past its political and scientific sell-by date, needs to be supplemented by anti-genderism. The success of the resulting right-wing discourse should cure us of any reductionist optimism. Time alone will not render it ineffective.

Feminist responses

The analysis of anti-genderism as a defence mechanism partly points to underlying social factors such as economic and symbolic precarization. Nevertheless, it can also be informative for an assessment of more immediate counter-strategies. If anti-genderism is understood not as a (however distorted) take on feminist gender studies, but as an image circulating to defend and mobilize a deeply reactionary world-view, it becomes immediately evident that simple correction of its mistakes does not lead very far. It is also far from consolidating grounds for an alternative, left hegemonic project. An additional reason why clarification and enlightenment do not help hinges on the fact that, certain absurdities aside, anti-gender discourse does in part understand its object with surprising correctness.¹⁷ Most anti-gender positions refer to a supposedly natural or divine order to counteract constructivism, yet the very fear that gender might be messed with highlights that they have learned something from feminism – they just do not like it. And well-meaning assertions that gay marriage, unisex toilets and gender-neutral expressions leave intact the traditional options display a certain bad faith. The addition of alternative options changes the established ones. Those

latter can no longer grant the comfort to be 'normal', 'natural' and 'the only thing to do'. They now fail to offer the satisfactory superiority over abject alternatives – except within the discourse of anti-genderism.

Articulating a non-defensive feminist answer to anti-genderism will involve a strong commitment to pluralism beyond a mere affirmation of difference and contingency. One context in which such a discourse has started to gain shape is a particular initiative concentrating on collaboration with refugees. In opposition to the general atmosphere after the Cologne events, as well as to the insidious invocation of 'feminism' to mobilize against migration, a group of a hundred women – including feminist theorists and gender scholars – has launched the platform 'We are doing it. Now'.¹⁸ Interestingly, the website content mostly gathers some of the standard 'welcome work' which has been done locally across Germany before. The innovation lies mostly in finding a new, non-apologetically progressive description for these activities. Breaking with the gesture of charitable help, the activists propose to see the collaboration between newly arrived and long-term inhabitants as a model for the new normality. Their self-characterization reads: 'We are united by the common goal of facing up to the challenge of worldwide migration with humanity and expertise. ... It is a movement away from pity and opinion, aid and defence mechanisms towards a culture of sharing and self-determined shaping of our world.'¹⁹

The political practices combined under this umbrella, however, are not just positions argued for, but materialize in concrete practices of cooperation and care. In focusing on the concrete needs of the newly arrived, the framing of the welcome activities by the 'We are doing it' network avoids the rhetoric of cultural difference which prevails even in well-meaning affirmations that the 'difficult task' of integrating 'foreigners' can be done. Instead the activities demonstrate how, from the angle of solidarity, differences are taken for granted and nevertheless seen as fluctuating – evoking notions of a 'female economy' characterized by abundance, proliferation of difference and need-orientation. Such a glimpse of pragmatic utopian practice will reverse neither the dramatic shutdown of Europe's external borders, nor the reactionary cultural trends within it. But it allows us to envisage the antagonism as one where the regressive side cannot claim to be the only one offering social protection against capitalist devastation.²⁰

Anti-genderism makes a desperate attempt to cement differences as hierarchical in defence against precarity and contingency. As regressive social protection, it tries to exclude racialized subjects from citizenship and humanity, and it insists on naturalizing the burden of need-orientation in the female gender role. A non-defensive response needs to build on the greater hope that solidarity might be pursued freely, reciprocally and socially. Of the many structural factors standing in the way of such a project, patriarchal and heteronormative gender roles have at least partially been overcome, due to both the impact of emancipatory social movements and changing material conditions. Much hinges on where we go from here.

Notes

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1. Tamara Micner provides a good overview of the media coverage: www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2016/01/21/tamara-micner/what-happened-in-cologne (accessed 28 April 2016).
2. See, for instance, Angela Davis's discussion of the myth of the black rapist in *Women, Race, and Class*, Random House, New York, 1981.
3. Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2005, p. 19.
4. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 20ff.
5. Only 0.4 per cent of all German professorships have a partial denomination for gender studies. See Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa, 'Eine Frage an und für unsere Zeit', in Hark and Villa, eds, *Anti-Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2015, pp. 15–40, p. 22.

6. <https://sciencefiles.org/tag/lann-hornscheidt/page/3> (accessed 9 May 2016).
7. Cf. Bożena Chołuj, “Gender-Ideologie” – ein Schlüsselbegriff des polnischen Anti-Genderismus’, in Hark and Villa, eds, *Anti-Genderismus*, pp. 219–38.
8. Juliane Lang, ‘Familie und Vaterland in der Krise. Der extrem rechte Diskurs um Gender’, in Hark and Villa, eds, *Anti-Genderismus*, pp. 167–82, pp. 167f.
9. Gabriele Kuby is one of the most vocal and prominent fundamentalist Catholic thinkers; see www.gabriele-kuby.de/wortmeldungen/gender-mainstreaming (accessed 28 April 2016). For the recycling of anti-communist and anti-GDR rhetorics in anti-genderism, see Kathleen Heft, ‘Der Osten Deutschlands. Vom Kommunismus zum Anti-Genderismus’, in Hark and Villa, eds, *Anti-Genderismus*, pp. 183–200.
10. In the federal state of Baden-Württemberg the educational guidelines promoting the coverage of non-heteronormative families and sexualities in school were strongly contested. The opponents rallied around a petition entitled ‘Future – Responsibility – Learning: No 2015 education plan under the banner of the rainbow’.
11. www.i-finger.de/pegida-positions-papier.pdf.
12. www.alternativefuer.de/programm-hintergrund/fragen-und-antworten/bildung-und-gleichstellung.
13. Christine Wimbauer, Mona Motakef and Julia Teschlade, ‘Prekäre Selbstverständlichkeiten’, in Hark and Villa, eds, *Anti-Genderismus*, pp. 41–57, p. 42.
14. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *The Anatomy of Prejudices*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1996.
15. Wimbauer, Motakef and Teschlade, ‘Prekäre Selbstverständlichkeiten’.
16. On the concept of ideology, see Rahel Jaeggi, ‘Re-thinking Ideology’, in Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher F. Zurn, eds, *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009, pp. 63–86; Karen Ng, ‘Ideology Critique from Hegel and Marx to Critical Theory’, *Constellations*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2015, pp. 393–404.
17. Cf. Hark and Villa, ‘Eine Frage an und für unsere Zeit’, pp. 18f.
18. <http://wirmachendas.jetzt/en> (accessed 10 May 2016).
19. <http://wirmachendas.jetzt/en/about-us/> (accessed 28 April 2016).
20. On the category of social protection, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 2001 [1944]; Nancy Fraser, ‘Between Marketization and Social Protection: Resolving the Feminist Ambivalence’, in *The Fortunes of Feminism*, Verso, London, 2013, pp. 227–41.

The impossibility of precarity

Francesco Di Bernardo

As everyone knows, the implementation of neoliberal labour policies in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia and Japan, together with the so-called structural adjustments initiated in the 1980s, led to the proliferation of temporary, part-time and supposedly self-employment job contracts. Many observers have sought to interpret this phenomenon through recourse to the concept of precarity. While the concept has been around for some time now, in its current connotation it was used for the first time in the late 1990s and early 2000s by Italian trade unionists and autonomists to denounce the uncontrolled and thoroughgoing casualization of the job market as an effect of neoliberal labour reforms. In recent years (most prominently after the 2011 protests of the *Indignados* in Spain), the concept of precarity has managed to break into the language of the mainstream media and politics.

In an article published in December 2015 in the *BBC News Magazine*, Peter Kerley delves into a set of data from the 2013 BBC’s class calculator survey and comments: ‘the traditional British social divisions of upper, middle and working class now seem out of date ... more than two and a half times as many people are classed as being in the precariat – with “precarious” everyday lives.’¹ The precariat is now widely considered as the most underprivileged social class. This interpretation draws on Guy Standing’s well-known formulation of the concept. The British sociologist maintains that neoliberal emphasis on market competitiveness has enabled the ‘transfer of