

Special Contribution

## **From Backlash to Online Trans-Exclusionism: Response to the Lecture by Prof. Pető**

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First of all, I'd like to express my gratitude to Prof. Ikoma and CGS for inviting me to participate in this symposium. It's a pleasure to have an opportunity to hear the lecture by Prof. Pető and to exchange our thoughts and ideas regarding the at once global and specifically local anti-gender movements and the increasingly threatened — and as I'd like to point out in my response, also mistreated and abused — notion of academic freedom.

Since I am not qualified to comment on the Hungarian situation, I would like to talk about the situation we have been facing in Japan. I thought I should comment on what has been happening a bit closer to “home”: that is, controversies and conflicts within and among feminist communities.

I will be touching on three issues: first, the backlash in Japan against feminisms and women's movements in the noughties, focusing on how feminists dealt with the threat (or more precisely, how we failed to deal properly with the threat); second, the on-going trans-exclusionism in the Japanese twittersphere and beyond, which in my view could be understood as an unexpected but at the same time predictable legacy of feminist reaction to the backlash fifteen years ago; third, the principle of academic freedom put forward not only *by* feminist academics but also *against* them, as observed around conflicts among feminists over trans-exclusionism (or transgenderism, depending on which side of the debate you are) in the U.K.

Let me start by looking back at the backlash in the early noughties in Japan against feminisms, women's movements and gender studies. The backlash started as a response from moral conservatives to the Basic Act for Gender

Equal Society, which came into force in 1999, and lasted till the mid noughties. What was remarkable about this gender backlash in Japan is that it was just as blatantly and systematically led by the national government as it was fueled and upheld by the grass-root moral/religious conservatives who are the major constituency of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. In this sense, it was arguably a strangely premature version of the “anti-gender” movements that we currently see elsewhere in the world as well. And just like the present “anti-gender” movements, one of the main battlefields of the backlash was the field of education and research.

In 2002, Yamatani Eriko, an extreme-right politician who later served in multiple ministerial positions, criticized in the Diet a booklet for junior high schoolers, titled *Love and Body Book for Adolescents*, for “promoting” contraceptive pills. Yamatani later claimed that the booklet “promotes free-sex among junior high schoolers.” In 2003, the conservatives shifted the focus to the sex education that had been specially developed in a school in Tokyo for children with mental/intellectual disabilities. Conservative members of the Metropolitan Assembly attacked the school for promoting “extreme and inappropriate” sex education, which they argued (inaccurately) as based on a “radicalized ideology of gender-free,” resulting in a mass disciplinary action against staff members. In 2005, a “project team for investigating the actual state of the extremely radical sex education and gender-free education” was formed by the ruling LDP. The project team, with Yamatani as the director general and Abe Shinzo, the current Japanese Prime Minister, as the chairperson, went as far as to suggest that the government should not use the word “gender” because “the definition of the term is not clear enough” and because “gender studies denies sexual differences, holds negative views of marriage and family and attempts to destroy the culture.” It would be useful to point out that the far-right, hyper-nationalistic, and anti-feminist moral/religious conservatism of the current government is directly and clearly traceable to this era.

What I would like to point out today, however, is not the backlash itself

but the way feminist and/or gender studies reacted to it. In attacking feminist movements and gender studies, the backlashers chose the spot they thought was the most controversial and “scandalous” to the general public, and as such the most divisive for the feminist communities: the issues of sexual and gender minorities. And, sadly, they chose right.

The backlashers claimed that feminists and the advocates for “gender-free movements” were denying sexual difference, creating a new generation of gender-confused, bisexual children, and to destroy families. Oh my god, how scandalous! Now, obviously this was a false claim. The feminists and women’s movements were not always trying to deny sexual difference, even though it may be true that some of us were working on undermining the patriarchal “family” system. And when it comes to creating a whole new generation of gender-fluid and bisexual children, unfortunately that was simply beyond our capacity.

Still, when the mainstream feminist and women’s groups quickly and emphatically denied the claim, repeatedly stressing that “feminists denying or questioning sexual difference is a groundless rumor spread by the backlashers” or that “our way is not going to create androgynous or bisexual kids,” instead of owning up to it and claiming that feminism could question the binary notions of sexual difference, or stating that we see no problem in having more gender-fluid and/or bisexual kids in society, they effectively failed gender and sexual minorities. This was especially clear when, trying to argue against the backlashers’ claim that feminism and “gender-free” movement negate “男らしさ manliness” and “女らしさ womanliness” (that is, qualities and characteristics that are expected from men and women respectively and that fit the respective gendered role they are supposed to play), mainstream feminist academics and activists kept stressing that they would *not* do such things. These claims did not only undermine the long-lasting feminist criticism of gender roles, but also showed very little concern for queer people, many of whom have been disciplined, ridiculed or reproached for not being manly or

womanly enough in one way or another. Critical voices against this mainstream feminist defense were never properly heard, however, and sometimes even criticized for being “divisive” of feminist movements when they had to unite and fight back.

In order to focus on survival in the difficult political climate of the backlash, mainstream feminism in Japan in the early noughties sacrificed intersectionality and thus failed feminism. We could argue that this was at least part of the reason why, when “LGBT” became slightly more fashionable and various LGBTQ activism started to rise again in Japan in the last decade, feminism could not play a major role and almost seems like it has been left behind.

After the worst storm of the backlash had passed, however, feminist and gender studies in Japan never truly recognized and reflected on this failure. We just moved on. Fifteen years forward, and my second topic is about an ongoing conflict in the Japanese twittersphere about transgender rights. This is a conflict between the group of women, some feminists, who argue that trans women are threatening their rights and safety, and those of us who argue for a more intersectional and therefore trans-inclusive feminism. The trans-exclusionary and trans-phobic claims by women and feminists became increasingly noticeable in the Japanese twittersphere last autumn (autumn 2018), when one of the leading women’s universities in Japan announced that it would accept applications from transgender girls (most of whom, under current Japanese law, cannot have changed their legal gender status because of their age, and therefore are “male” on paper at the time of application). The trans-exclusionists claim that this is part of a trend of misogynous transgenderism that seeks to invade women’s space, threaten women’s safety, and usurp women’s hard-earned rights and opportunities.

Which are, in fact, hard-earned. Or more precisely, we have been working really hard to realize equal rights and opportunities for women, and the truth is, we are struggling to keep what we have earned. The government under PM

Abe has been quite successfully pushing their moral conservative agenda, upholding what they call the “traditional” family where a Mom would take care of kids (hopefully three or more, according to a former Olympics minister) and Dad and the elderlies, even as women are getting more and more exhausted from and frustrated with the misogyny of this society. And this is exactly what the trans-exclusionists hold up as the reason for prioritizing the majority cis-gendered women and opposing trans rights. “Women are so oppressed, so discriminated against and suffering from inequality,” they argue. “Asking women (i.e. cis-women) to accept and care for those who have grown up enjoying the male privilege, asking women to share what little rights and opportunities they’ve earned for themselves with trans folks, is in itself a form of misogyny.”

In the Japanese twittersphere, where the majority of “feminist” accounts are anonymous (i.e. their account name is not traceable to who they really are), this strategy to appeal to women’s fear of sexual harassment and violence, and to their anger and resentment towards the misogynous society, mould it into the kind of hateful anger that women are not usually allowed to express, and re-direct it towards trans women has so far proven to be effective. Some estimate the number of active trans-antagonist twitter accounts to have come up to about 1000, which is not a small number considering they have only become visible for a year or so, and considering how few “feminists” accounts you could find anyway in the Japanese twittersphere.

In other words, the sentiments incited to mobilize the current online attack on trans women by mainly cis-women and feminists is not far from that behind the excuse put forward by mainstream feminisms and gender studies in the early noughties to put off issues of minority women: fear, anger and the heightened defensiveness triggered by them. There has not been any extensive research on how trans-antagonism has spread in the Japanese twittersphere, who the main instigators were and how they operated. Still, it may be safe to say that, despite how widely the word “TERF (trans exclusionary radical

feminist) has spread and expanded its meaning in the course, in Japan it is not “radical feminists” who constitute the majority of these people (which is of little surprise, seeing how radical feminism itself has hardly survived in Japan). While it is true that some of the main instigators appear to feel a certain affinity to radical feminists’ ideas, for the majority of the online trans-antagonists, it was never the ideas that attracted them to the “cause” of defending women. It was fear, anger and the urgently felt need to defend themselves.

What I find profoundly ironical is that some of these trans-antagonist “feminists” have started to seek alliance with anyone with similar views: and not surprisingly, those who are most eager and willing to warn against the “threat of transgenderism” are the moral conservatives and the ruling LDP government supported by them. In fact, some of the trans-antagonist “feminist” accounts have started to argue that they have no other choice but to support the LDP and the moral conservative’s view as more agreeable to “ordinary women.” At the same time, other accounts have suggested that the real source of concern is the radicalized transgenderism which they say is pushing ordinary women too far and is likely to invite the backlash against feminism and against women and transsexual people. In other words, we have two opposing arguments, one clearly supporting the moral conservatives’ view, the other expressing concern about the moral conservatives and a possible backlash. Both of them claim to protect ordinary women, whom they argue are put under threat one way or another because of trans rights. Both of them, moreover, are the direct descendants of the backlash in the noughties: the former blatantly repeats and supports the anti-trans sentiment used as a tool to attack feminism; and the latter repeats the gesture of cutting off the “weakest link” to defend against the backlash.

As a result of the historical failure of feminist movements in the noughties to become more inclusive and build a coalition with difference among women, we are still facing the same danger as we did fifteen years ago of narrowing the scope of feminism by cutting off minority women, but this time, on top of

that, we are also losing women to moral conservatives.

This conflict between trans-exclusionary and trans-inclusive feminists (or between “gender critical feminists” and “trans rights activists,” depending on which side you are) is, in a way similar to the global anti-gender movements, essentially a transnational one. I will finish my comment with a quick reference to the debate on “academic freedom” outside Japan that has taken place around precisely this kind of conflict among feminists.

Last October, *The Guardian* published a letter by a group of 54 academics, many if not all of them feminists, claiming that they are under “ideologically driven attack” because of their academic work on transgender issues, and in need of protection. Students at various British universities have been rallying against speakers they regard as “transphobic,” while those criticized have been arguing that it is not transphobic to investigate transgender issues from a range of critical academic perspectives and that they are being unjustly silenced.

Could we understand this as a conundrum where a feminist effort for a safer and more inclusive academic environment gets set up against another feminist effort to open up the space for a less restrained and more critical investigation of the normative ideas regarding sex, gender and bodies? Is this a matter of academic freedom or a matter of social justice and fight against discrimination? Or, to complicate the topic of today’s symposium: how should we, as feminist academics, navigate the discussion about academic freedom and gender studies in the face of state-operated anti-gender movements, when we also have crucial and critical differences and conflicts within ourselves, which could not be put off or set aside and yet could easily be manipulated and abused as they are by the anti-gender movements?

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