

Troubling Gender. New Turbulences in the Politics of Gender in Europe. Some Introductory Remarks

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ABSTRACT: *Some introductory remarks to the volume »Troubling Gender. New turbulences in the politics of Gender in Europe«.*

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In 2021, we organized a conference on »Troubling Gender: New Turbulences in the Politics of Gender in Europe«. Deeply concerned about recent developments in the European regions and beyond, the Commission for Gender Studies and Queer Anthropology¹ of the German Association for European Ethnology and Empirical Cultural Analysis (DGEKW) wanted to facilitate exchange between scholarly disciplines as well as between scholars and activists from Western and Eastern Europe. The aim of the conference was to analyze anti-gender and anti-feminist developments with ethnographical means, to discuss possible interventions and to examine potential strategies of solidarity across the European regions. Due to COVID-19, the conference took place online. Nevertheless, participants were highly engaged in presentations and discussions, working on a better understanding of how gender and sexuality had become battlefields in recent political struggles over hegemony and providing insights into the ongoing authoritarian transformation of European politics and societies. Last but not least, the conference hinted at practices of resistance and offered interpretations of as well as approaches to the current conjuncture of »right-wing times« (Tudor/Ticktin 2021). In our invitation to the conference, we wrote:

»The latest events in Europe indicate that the politics of gender and sexuality is becoming extremely hostile. Many gender-related topics are (again) open for a discussion. In Poland, Hungary, and Croatia there are attempts to limit or to revoke the right to abortion; Gender Studies have been banned at universities in Hungary and Bulgaria; Austrian FPÖ/ÖVP government has severely limited the money for the research of gender politics. LGBT rights have been questioned in France and Italy, while in Poland we witness the emergence of the so-called »LGBT-free zones« and the diminishment of LGBT rights. With the rise of the AfD in Germany, gender imaginaries and anti-feminist discourses (believed to had been long overcome) gain more and

more prominence, while the successes of gender democracy and the attained liberalization of gender relations and sexual practices are increasingly framed as threats. At the same time, arguments for gender equality are used to criticize immigration, while gender is used as a marker of modernity and distinction in Western countries as well as in post-socialist societies.« (<https://troubling-gender.eu/about/>)

Reading this invitation from today's perspective, we cannot but admit that the situation has become even more serious and that attacks on queer and feminist movements and initiatives have become even more aggressive. Right-wing politics on gender and sexuality has produced a hostile landscape for even more people in even more European regions. We are concerned about the diminishing legitimacy of anti-discrimination policies and rights regarding bodily autonomy, the criminalization of abortion in several European countries and the ongoing ignorance or intentional rejection of transnational conventions, such as the Istanbul Convention against sexualized violence.

Furthermore, as feminist and queer scholars, we are confronted with the fact that right-wing movements have been occupying feminist arguments with ease, putting forward interpretations of concepts developed by gender and queer scholars and activists that are in line with racist and Islamophobic positions. Finally, and importantly, we as Gender Studies scholars experience attacks on ourselves, our colleagues and our study programs, being aware that such anti-gender and anti-feminist attacks do not require any knowledge of or engagement with Gender and Queer Studies and their findings but are mostly stereotypical attributions dressed as arguments and repeated monotonously.

At the same time, we are convinced – and some scholars have shown this in more detail (cf. Petó and Barat in this volume; Dietze/Roth 2020; Köttig et al. 2017) – that these attacks are not only meant to delegitimize Gender and Queer Studies across European regions. Gender and sexuality themselves are the ground on which an ongoing struggle for political hegemony is taking place (Tudor/Ticktin 2021; Jounait et al. 2013). This battlefield has successfully mobilized a great number of people across various political spectra and is working as a kind of ideological or »symbolic glue« (Kováts et al. 2015; Petó in this volume). Attacks on (non-hegemonic forms of) gender and sexuality are used as a foundation for the re-establishing of national narratives based on heteronormative family patterns; they enable the legitimization of the prohibition of any modes of education on sexual diversity, of literature and children's books on non-normative family constructions and queer identities. The restriction of human rights regarding sexuality and reproductive health in Europe goes hand in hand with the strengthening of the coalition of religious movements and »anti-gender« politics (cf. <https://www.epfweb.org/node/837>). These attacks have also fueled new-old articulations of racism in Europe as they seemingly create a favorable moral breeding ground for intensified politics of difference and fear (Kuhar/Paternotte 2017).

Since long, gender, sexuality and race have been serving as a benchmark for distinguishing between progress and backwardness within the colonial matrix – in the current conjuncture, these colonial images and hierarchies are heavily re-worked in the midst of the globally ongoing polycrisis in order to define who is part of the club of wealthy Europe. With the collapse of the socialist system, the capitalist-driven transformation of the postsocialist countries in the East and the EU enlargement process towards the East, the situation of women* as well as the handling of sexual diversity and gender equality more broadly have gained new momentum as markers within the emerging highly uneven postcolonial/postsocialist European landscape (Blagojević 2009; Busheikin 1997; Einhorn 1995; see also Boatcă 2015). As several articles in this volume show, race, gender and sexuality are not

only entangled in the East-West dynamic but have been made highly productive to co-constitute the East-West dichotomy itself, both between countries and within their respective societies (cf. Lewicki 2023). As Altman and Symons point out with their notion of »queer wars«, the relentless struggle between the advocates of LGBT rights as human rights and their opponents is often »perceived as an inevitable cultural clash between western democracies and ›the rest‹« (Altman/Symons 2016, 3). In sum, gender and sexuality function as a lens that allows for studying broad social, economic, cultural and political transformations and upheavals.

Based on the 2021 conference, this issue of *Berliner Blätter* assembles analytical papers as well as polyvocally written discussions on how to make sense of these developments and their local and regional specificities and effects. Following the aim of the conference, the issue brings together queer and feminist positions and analyses from Western and Eastern European contexts and investigates possibilities of solidarity across different positionalities and histories of struggles.

The papers in this volume start from a notion of Europe that stresses its globally entangled character. As Adam et al. discuss in more detail in their paper (in this volume), Europe is not a confined geographic space, a distinct cultural area or a historically exclusive »project sui generis« but multiple and incomplete, both product and producer of its colonial projects and imperial relations past and present (Adam et al. 2019; Chakrabarty 2000). From this perspective, we can see clearly the ongoing process of Europeanization, the contested nature of its borders, the struggles over questions of belonging and policies of exclusion.

The developments discussed above are often summarized with generalizing concepts such as homonationalism, postsocialism, neoliberalism or authoritarianism. The articles in this issue show that these phenomena need to be researched and discussed in a more nuanced manner in order to understand the respective logics and everyday practices that produce these social and political situations. Bilić et al. (in this volume), as the participants of a round table at the conference, argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the fragmented nature of the gender-queer intellectual, academic and activist landscape in Southeast Europe, which evolves around multiple struggles and points of contention – something that we can assume to be true for other regions as well. What becomes evident is the need for a more nuanced theoretical toolkit that takes into consideration the different specific situations. Ethnographic research urges us to paint a differentiated picture, making it possible to discern differences as well as commonalities of local conditions, developments and outcomes as effects of situated and globally entangled politics. Given the traveling of concepts and theories (Binder et al. 2011; Said 1997), ethnographic research can follow translations, shifts and contradictions. Against the backdrop of a careful examination, it is possible to reconsider and describe in more clarity the tensions that occur when postsocialist and post-colonial constellations meet and overlap. This seems to be the necessary precondition if we want to be able to formulate criticism and resulting political strategies in a way that makes it possible to respond to the specificities of the respective situations.

With this in mind, for this collection, we strongly supported collective writing projects, polyvocally written papers and curated discussions. These modes of writing and (re)presentation enable us to bridge disciplines and geographies; they create spaces of conversation between activists and more academically positioned perspectives and modes of knowledge production; they make it possible to think through the current turbulences and the related multiple traps, contradictions and ambiguities and reclaim feminist analytics as critical and profound reflection. Overall, this issue contributes to a gender-queer critical ethnographic analysis of the contemporary conjuncture of the politics of gender in/of Europe; it takes

part in the struggles of feminist and queer lives to build a future and in the ongoing – and increasingly urgent – search for other modes of doing and being.

Gender Politics of/in Europe

For the first section of this issue, we have assembled contributions that take a closer look at current intersectional gender politics in so-called Central and Eastern Europe. Although proper Europeanness is associated with former colonial powers, 'whiteness' as an identity marker and defining feature of ›Europe‹ is also eagerly reproduced by nationalist and right-wing populist movements outside the European »core«, notably in so-called Central and Eastern Europe (Böröcz 2021; Kalmar 2023). Proceeding from various starting points, the papers focus on notions of gender and sexuality and discuss their contribution to the production of different understandings of Europe and European modernity as well as to (self-)produced concepts of East and West. How are dynamics pertaining to gender and sexuality expressed locally, and how do they feed into the upsurge of nationalism? How are they inscribed into broader dynamics and discourses on Europe, Europeanization and transformations of the (il)liberal state? *Anika Keinz* and *Paweł Lewicki* aim at »Discussing Europeanization and East-West dynamics of race, gender and sexuality«. Both have long been working (together and separately) on questions of gender, race, and sexuality politics in Poland. Based on this long-term experience, they are interested in racial relations and states of morality, aiming to explore the contribution of race-critical studies to better understand, for example, gender and sexual politics in Poland and the newly emerging strong nationalism. Against the backdrop of a panel discussion held at the conference, they examine how categories such as »race,« »gender« and »sexuality« contribute to the reproduction of various understandings of »Europe« and »European modernity« and to (self-)produced notions of »East« and »West«.

Poland is also the field of *Agnieszka Balcerzak's* study. She is interested in the symbolic intensity and turmoil the »Political Aesthetics of Visual Pro-Choice Protest in Poland« produces. These »angry posters« – as Balcerzak calls the protest images and signs supporting the pro-choice movement in the Polish »war on abortion« – draw on feminist imaginaries, symbols and aesthetic codes while appropriating pop-cultural elements and (anti)national visual rhetoric. Against this backdrop, Balcerzak discusses implications for feminist practice more generally. The examples she draws on in more detail show the shifting entanglement of feminism, universal pro-choice demands and national symbolisms, demonstrating how visual images and (inter)national codings have become a means of contestation within Poland's highly polarized society.

The following two papers shift the perspective to the West. First, *Beatrice Odierna* shows, in her paper on »Social Work ›with refugees‹ as a site of gendered everyday bordering«, how social workers put integration politics into daily practice in the context of counseling, administering, and accommodating refugees as well as how their daily routines are structured by gendered imaginaries of the »other«. Often the first contact for many with the German welfare system, social workers become both a target and an instrument for the implementation of (gendered) integration policies. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, *Odierna* describes and reflects on social work with people categorized as refugees as an important site of gendered forms of everyday bordering.

Next, *Miriam Gutekunst* and *Sabine Hess* pick up the thread laid out by the other contributions and discuss the contradictions and ambivalences entangled with queer and feminist

politics in the context of the current rise of right-wing nationalist politics. Their paper starts from the seemingly contradictory observation that some right-wing politicians present themselves as engaged in equality and diversity politics while attacking feminist and especially queer politics. This »politics of reversal« shows »dangerous convergences of gender and race in migration and feminist politics« that can be observed not only in right-wing contexts but across the political spectrum in Germany. By drawing on their differently positioned ethnographic research fields – the EU migration and border regime on the one hand and feminist movements in Germany on the other –, the authors explore how culturalist and racializing gender discourses within current migration and feminist politics reinforce each other on the level of macro politics as well as on the level of movements strategies and show what kinds of alliances emerge (intentionally or unintentionally) between the two scales.

The section closes with a polyvocal paper presented by scholars deeply entangled with or based in Southeast Europe. Asking the question »Can we fight together?«, *Bojan Bilić, Linda Gusia, Nita Luci, Diana Manesi, Jovan Džoli Ulićević* and *Čarna Brković* discuss multi-layered debates, struggles and points of contention that shape gender-queer scholarship and activism in Southeast Europe. They show which impact these situated debates have on claims, often-used notions and political positions, for example in regard to progress, civilization or Europeanness. Against this backdrop, it is a highly controversial question whether it is possible to fight together for social justice and the overcoming of the current state. How could it be possible to bring together the concern for the problems caused by unjust economic redistribution with those caused by unjust patterns of cultural recognition? This discussion reinforces the call to listen carefully and recognize on equal terms the different experiences across the European regions in order to strengthen the efforts of a transgressive progressive politics for social justice.

Gender Studies under Attack

The second section of this issue is devoted entirely to attacks on Gender Studies as an academic program, as well as those on feminist scholars, politicians and activists. Here too, we have brought together papers from different contexts and regions in Europe.

Betül Yazar and *Yasemin Karakaşoğlu* start this section with an article that reflects critically on the complicated situation of »Feminist and Gender Studies Scholars in Exile«. The experiences of scholars who came to Germany because they had to leave the academic community in their home country show in startling clarity the neoliberal and eurocentric state of academia in Germany. Forced migration, which culminated in 2015 under the influence of wars and war-like conflicts and the rise of anti-democratic regimes all over the world includes feminist and queer Gender Studies scholars targeted by authoritarian regimes due to the latter's symptomatic anti-gender policies and discourses. The authors explore the experiences of these scholars who encompass both the uneven ground and efforts of integration as well as the overall gendered and epistemic inequalities structuring the neoliberalized higher-education system in Germany.

Andrea Pető focuses on the situation of Gender Studies in Hungary where Gender Studies programs have been closed down. The paper – originally presented at the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin, which we thank for permission to reprint the text in our issue – discusses multiple reasons why Gender Studies have changed due to illiberal and anti-feminist attacks. Even though the work of Gender Studies scholars is acknowledged by a larger audience, they are under constant attack via »online public harassment«. *Pető* shows how these

attacks resonate with campaigns initiated by anti-gender movements as a nationalist, neo-conservative response to a multilayered crisis. She points to how gender works as »symbolic glue« to create alliances of hate and exclusion in order to re-establish an order considered »normal«. As her paper shows in more detail, the invocation of Gender Studies scholars is full of paradoxes – as are the lessons to be learned from this »paradoxical recognition«.

Concrete experiences with anti-feminist and anti-gender attacks are also discussed in the next contribution. Looking for »Counterstrategies against Antifeminism«, *Marion Näser-Lather, Dorothee Beck, Sabine Grenz* and *Ilse Lenz* give insights into their current research projects in the field of Gender Studies that have been (and still are) under attack. The authors argue for a more nuanced and critical investigation of these attacks in order to develop more in-depth conceptual work that bridges academia and practice. Only a collaborative engagement that considers its own omissions in respect to racist and intersectional power structures makes strengthening the common project of fostering social justice possible.

Queering Europe

The third and final section of this issue puts the notion of »queer« center stage. Again, the papers in this section start from different positions and follow different interests.

First, *Erzsebet Barat's* contribution focuses on »Political Struggles around ›Gender‹«, asking whether the recent »war on gender« in Hungary might have an impact in »de-centering queer theory«. She takes three legislative acts that were passed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to show, in a nutshell, the effects of the government's anti-gender propaganda as closely entangled with the right-wing regime that has been in place since 2010. Barat argues that attempting to define gender as a proper object, as some feminists have done, is insufficient in view of the ongoing attacks. Rather, it seems necessary to bridge internal divisions, navigate differences and shift away from a focus on hate to a trust-based queer solidarity. Only then will it be possible to fight the ongoing hate attacks and all forms of hegemonic masculinity.

Next, *Bogdan Popa* presents a »Marxist case for abortion«. »[R]ethinking the imagination of bodies in Soviet Marxism«, he develops a new view on current anti-feminist movements as well as recent anti-abortionist positions. Starting from current developments induced by the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in the US, *Popa* analyses Romanian film productions from the 1960s in order to show the relevance of a historical argument for a Marxist pro-abortion politics. This way, he traces an ideological shift from the Marxist concept of a productive body to a politics of natality, which was followed by an abortion ban in 1966. He provides a psychoanalytical Marxist critique that makes it possible not only to reject the rhetoric of »individual rights« but also to develop a dialectical interpretation of capitalism.

Last but not least, a text collage offers some thoughts on the possibilities of »Queering Europe«. In this collage, *Jens Adam, Beate Binder, Čarna Brković* and *Patrick Wielowiejski* bring different anthropological research fields into conversation with each other. Against the backdrop of a fishbowl discussion that took place during the conference, this paper demonstrates the productivity of thinking across gender-queer theories and anthropological Europeanization research. The authors offer three possible starting points for a queering of Europe as a mode of knowledge production and political vision: the deconstruction of hegemonic imaginaries of Europe; attention to the pluralistic and fragmented nature of Europe(s) and Europeanization processes; and practices of producing and archiving imaginaries of Europe. With their strong emphasis on the productivity of ethnographic research,

the authors show the capacity of a double attentiveness – for that which emerges in the »gaps and cracks of Europeanization« and for the ways in which institutions working in the name of Europe generate heterogeneous experiences and resulting inequalities. Queering Europe makes it possible to grasp the central role of the sexual and the gendered for the constitution and stabilization of Europe while staying with the desire of a doing otherwise (Weiß 2016) and to foster solidarity across the European regions.

Our attempt to bring together academic and activist voices from Western European (mainly Germany) and Eastern European contexts at the conference as well as for this issue of *Berliner Blätter* followed this very desire of doing academia otherwise through listening and learning. Acknowledging that (violent) histories frame and have an important impact on the present of gender and sexual politics on the macro level as well as on the micro politics of the everyday, the contributions in this issue show that, again and again, politics of gender and sexuality can easily be connected to and have been instrumental for nationalist, exclusionary projects that aim to legitimize hierarchies within and between societies, partly in the name of progress, partly in the name of tradition and »security«. Conversations across disciplines and regions as well as between academia and activism also showcase that one of the first targets of authoritarian transformations are gender and sexual rights, bodily autonomy rights as well as the right to live in and with differences. Gender Studies and Queer Anthropology are well-equipped to analyze the present conjuncture as an archive of the present and make sense of current struggles over hegemony of which we as Gender and Queer Studies academics are part.

We would like to express our gratitude to a great number of people who helped with organizing the conference, inviting speakers and preparing this publication. We are incredibly thankful to Svenja Schurade (University of Göttingen), who worked as program organizer on the conference, and Ronda Ramm (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), who helped – as a student assistant – set up the conference and – now as a member of the academic staff – prepare this issue. We also want to thank Jelka Günther (University of Göttingen) for her initial help with various applications and setting up the conference website. We are also very grateful to the staff of »Neue Rituale«, the studio that designed and implemented the conference website as digital infrastructure for hosting the conference online. It was a great pleasure to work with them on creating a website that resonated with the conference topic both visually and practically.

We are enormously grateful to the different funding bodies that made the conference and book project possible as an interdisciplinary and European endeavor. Specifically, we thank the Ministry for Science and Culture of Lower Saxony, which made this project possible with its large grant as part of the program »Niedersächsisches Vorab«. We also thank LAGEN (the Association of Women and Gender Studies in Lower Saxony), the Göttingen Center for Gender Studies as well as the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology at the University of Göttingen, both of which worked in close cooperation with us (the Commission for Gender Studies and Queer Anthropology) to make the conference happen.

Special thanks also go to our partner commission at the DGEKW, »Europeanization_ Globalization: Ethnographies of the Political«, which collaborated with us in the programming and realization of the conference. This cooperation was a great resource and provided great depth to all discussions.

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We hope this issue will foster cooperation and discussion across disciplines, between academia and activism and across all European regions.

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Note

- 1 At the time of the conference, the commission was still called »Commission for Women's and Gender Studies«.

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