

Bias and the Politicization of Gender Studies Scholarship¹

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Abstract

In this essay we argue that the inferior epistemic status of gender studies in the epistemic cultures of higher education have been contributing to the vilification of gender studies scholars and created a fertile ground for the backlash the scholarship has been experiencing. On the one hand there is the problematic epistemic status of gender studies (which we will further elaborate), and on the other hand, the affective study of the epistemic communities and cultures has pointed to the positionality of gender studies scholars as ‘affective aliens’. In order to help advance gender studies scholarship and prevent its demise by the hands of its political adversaries, we propose to look at the complex practices of academic epistemic communities, which may instead help build solidarities across different fields.

Keywords: *gender studies, epistemic status, academia, anti-gender movements, feminist killjoys.*

Introduction

If it is true that academic freedom is an indication of the health of a liberal democracy, then the politicization of gender studies in CEE is a reliable testimony to the looming threat of authoritarianism in the region. This article will sketch the different ways in which opposition to

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gender studies research has manifested itself in Europe and other regions such as Brazil or the Russian Federation.

As a convenient proxy for populist far-right and neo-conservative policymaking, gender research and scholars have become publicly framed by some political actors as the ‘threatening other’ (Engeli 2019). In this text we first highlight that we have been witnessing particular and successful practices aimed at restricting gender studies scholars, projects and academic programs. However, we also argue that what has not always been visible and highlighted in the debates on the current political opposition to gender studies, are the regional histories of scientific practice, the epistemic cultures, and also the political discourse and policy-making that underpin the opposition to gender research. By drawing attention to these contexts, we aim to elaborate on the recent developments with the objective of calling for a wider support of gender studies scholarship within academic epistemic communities.

The first two sections of this essay summarize the recent accounts of opposition to gender studies which demonstrate three particular practices of opposition – academic de-institutionalization, the targeting of financial resources and harassment/bullying of gender studies scholars. In the later sections of this paper we discuss the inferior epistemic status of gender studies in the epistemic cultures of higher education (Do Mar Pereira 2017), which we believe have been contributing to the vilification of gender studies scholars and created a fertile ground for the backlash the scholarship has been experiencing. On the one hand there is the problematic epistemic status of gender studies (which we will further elaborate), and on the other hand, the affective study of the epistemic communities and cultures has pointed to the positionality of gender studies scholars as ‘affective aliens’ (Ahmed 2010; 2012).

As this newly experienced backlash from a variety of political actors plays out through political institutions and occurs outside of the rules and the environment of academic epistemic communities (Knorr Cetina 2007; Szapuová 2009), this means that many scholars, academic communities and organizations face opposition unseen before. By putting different perspectives together, we aim to make sense of this backlash also by proposing to reinforce solidarity and understanding among scholars hailing from different academic communities.

The fate of gender studies in higher education: de-institutionalization or budget cuts

Gender studies have been established via research and study programs which focus on the presence of gender structures, or the functioning of cultural mechanisms of gendered construction. ‘Gender’ as a term itself has been adopted and popularized among feminist thinkers of the Anglo-American world in the 1960s and 1970s with the objective to create an analytical category which would recognize the social dimensions of the biological sex. Gender studies is thus a field of scholarship appealing to this category in order to analyze the gendered social praxis on the level of individual, institutions or symbols¹. The studies are inherently critical and interdisciplinary as they are informed by feminist philosophy and epistemology² (Kiczková 2011). What we thus understand to be the institutionalization of a field of study is a set of processes within the academic epistemic communities, whereby a developing body of knowledge is recognized and legitimated. This can happen with the creation of independent research and teaching centers, setup and recognition of journals and other publications dedicated to the studies, or by the creation of separate courses or modules of study (Valkovičová and Hardoš 2020). The process of the institutionalization of gender studies within academic communities and organizations has been for decades embraced by debates of autonomy vs. integration which centered round the question of whether gender knowledge should be introduced (mainstreamed) into existing disciplinary structures or whether it should have separate centers of knowledge production³ (Henderson 2019). However, as a field of its own, gender studies have been recently also experiencing exactly the opposite - de-institutionalization which goes hand in hand with de-funding.

The most blatant and hardline opposition to gender studies in the CEE region has been that of the Viktor Orbán administration in Hungary, which attempted the de-institutionalization of gender

¹ While scholars of psychoanalysis and post-structuralism may use the category of gender as an analytical category aimed at studying identity, language and the symbolic order, scholars of history study primarily the power relations as well as cultural and social domains which are affected by gender relations. Such plurality in understanding and using the category of gender as an analytical tool has been for decades described by scholars as constructive and creative, rather than conflicting (Kiczková 2011).

² The genealogy of gender studies and the so-called women’s studies contain mutual paths; nevertheless, the approaches within these study fields have different functions. Both developed from feminist and women’s rights movements, however, women’s studies which dominated in the American academic communities, have been established prior to first gender studies courses and centers as the focus was on the experience and social reality of women. While the approaches of women’s studies query the differences between women and men, the current gender studies question the values which are ascribed to these differences (Kiczková 2011).

³ As Henderson (2019) writes, in some countries, institutional mainstreaming policies led to the prevalence of the integration approach.

studies as a study program of higher education, and succeeded. In August 2018, when the Hungarian Ministry of Human Capacities (giving less than 24 hours deadline to provide comments) effectuated legal amendments with regards to gender studies, the academic module was completely de-institutionalized throughout the country. At the time, two universities in Hungary were offering graduate degrees in gender studies - Central European University and ELTE (there, the program only started in 2017). The Hungarian Accreditation Committee had not been involved in the process; the initiative was of governmental, not bureaucratic nature (Pető 2018). The arguments given by Hungarian governmental officials were of neoliberal and conservative nature. Allegedly, the move was made in an effort to economize taxpayer's money seeing as (according to the Orbán administration) numerous graduates' skills do not meet the demands of the market. It was also argued that the agenda of gender studies research does not fit within the framework of traditional Hungarian and Christian values, which is also why there has been little interest in the program anyway. However, the de-institutionalization of gender studies in Hungary has to be observed with regards to other initiatives aimed to limit academic freedoms. Never before has the government of an EU member state legislated to obstruct and limit academic freedoms in such a way and to such an extent (Pető 2018). Gender studies were not the only targets of this set of policy directives. In 2019, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was stripped of a portion of its property by the government. Among the controversial moves of the government was the closing down of the archives of Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs. The set of arguments given to justify these moves was, just as in the case of gender studies, was the need for economization (Kovács 2019).

These moves are but one part of a much broader trend. In one case outside the EU, the reasoning presented to counter the institutional footing of gender studies research has been more heavily grounded in vague, sweeping reactionary moralization. Between 2016 and 2018, the European University in St. Petersburg faced existential threat after having been bullied by Russian bureaucratic structures for its liberal arts program. The university eventually lost its accreditation and building. Gender and sexuality studies were pointed to as the main problem (Kelly 2017). It was restored in 2018.

Furthermore, a different practice of de-institutionalization has occurred in Romanian higher education which did not directly aim to omit gender studies as an academic field, but instead

forbade "propagating theories and opinion on gender identity according to which gender is a separate concept from biological sex" (Tidey 2020, 1). Like the Hungarian case of de-institutionalization, this legal amendment within higher education is certainly unique, but goes further in terms of censorship. Following these changes, many scholars of social sciences from universities in Bucharest and Cluj did not hide their criticism and openly opposed the legal amendment, claiming they will not yield to it. In the meantime, students' organizations launched a petition to repeal the law (Gherasim 2020). Attempts to undermine gender research have, in a few cases, also taken the form of budget cuts and the targeting of access to financial resources. In August 2018, a UNESCO project proposal of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences on gender equality in schooling *Forum for a gender-balanced model of schools* was blocked by the Ministry of Education via the Academy higher administration due to conservative and nationalist media outcry (Darakchi 2019). In 2019, the far-right political party Alternative for Germany (AfD) pleaded to discontinue gender studies funding entirely. Though generally considered an outsider party, the AfD has been steadily gaining traction in the past few years (Apperly 2019). Limitations to budgets can be again understood as moves to 'economize taxpayer's money', whereby gender studies programs and projects are perceived to be less rentable.

The targeting of scholars as 'agents of ideology': harassment and personal attacks

Most people working in GS research are familiar with fellow scholars sometimes responding to worries about what is happening to gender studies by pointing out that 'other fields struggle as well'. They would not be wrong. Online harassment of scholars, for example, continues to be the subject of ideological tug of war on social media. In 2019, two academics researching civility and tolerance on Twitter were subjected to rape and death threats to the point where police were compelled to station patrols around their homes (Times Higher Education 2019). Publicly active members of virtually any academic field of expertise even remotely related to public policy have, at some point, come up against science denial from pundits, online or physical harassment and have received death threats. There is evidence at hand to show that female and/or LGTBQI researchers have tended to be harassed in gendered/sexist terms. American gender studies scholars in particular have been were politically targeted and harassed online for various statements that were attributed to them (Ferber 2018).

Furthermore, examples of harassment of scholars such as the targeting of American scholar Judith Butler in Brazilian Sao Paulo during her visit when protesters burned her in effigy as a witch do stand out (Evans 2019). A report by Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW) commented that

the virulence and scale of the attack contrasted with the very small protest organized against the philosopher when she visited the country in 2015, bluntly illustrating how these forces have become exponentially aggressive in the course of the last two years” (Sexuality Policy Watch 2018, 1).

Brazilian scholars themselves have been facing harassment from students and political elites. Scholar Marlene de Fáveri was sued recently for ‘ideological persecution’ as political actors have been petitioning students to record and film teachers in Brazil who ‘spread ideological statements’ (Redden 2018).

Back in Europe, the work of Italian scholar Federico Batani was decried by the conservative daily La Varietà. As a consequence, the Ministry of Education as a donor blocked his questionnaire on classroom bullying in 2018 (Apperly 2019). In Poland and elsewhere in Europe, scholars have witnessed attempts to establish watch lists of gender and sexuality scholars (Engeli 2019). In Bulgaria, during a national debate on the prospective ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention), a group of Bulgarian academics working on gender and public policy wrote up a petition to support and explain the value of the Convention. They were subsequently blamed by the media for spreading ‘anti-Bulgarian values’ (Darakchi 2019). In another country of Central and Eastern Europe - Slovakia, scholars mostly working in the fields of pedagogy and psychology were likewise attacked in the media during the conservative 2015 Referendum campaign that sought to restrict LGBTI rights and sexual education (Maďarová 2015). To top this anecdotal evidence of political agenda against gender studies scholars and scholarship, we should not fail to mention a fake bomb, which was placed in front of the Swedish National Secretariat for Gender Research in Gothenburg in 2018 (Evans 2019).

These are but a handful of examples of the efforts of conservative and far-right backlash to gender studies scholars and scholarship. It is essential to note that the presence of the actors and their agenda runs across all strata of society and government in all of Central Eastern Europe and elsewhere. While in some countries, political elites or civil society actors build up their political

capital with the use of the rhetoric of gender ideology, elsewhere it is the media and the pundits who attack researchers and their work (Frey et al. 2014). It seems that some scholars across Europe have already opted for the route of ‘self-censorship’ and the choices of less sensitive topics of research and teaching in order to avoid such attacks (Paternotte 2019). It can then perhaps be argued that what is specific to gender studies, in terms of the harassment scholars face, is not so much that there is more of it per se, but that these scholars also lack the institutional support by fellow scholars from neighboring fields, departments and other institutions.

Interactions between ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric and gender studies scholarship

The incidents mentioned above do not alone explain the obsessive preoccupation of the conservative and far-right with gender studies. In the past few years, the rising tide of attacks on the field has produced substantial research on the influence of ‘the gender ideology’ rhetoric and the actors who make use of it in European and national policymaking processes (e.g. Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Petö 2015; Korolczuk and Graff 2018).

Scholars have also identified the political and religious roots of the discursive concept of gender ideology within the oppositions of the Holy See developed in the 1990s to the beginnings of the international feminist developmental agenda linked to reproductive rights (Hennig 2018; Case 2016; Garbagnoli 2016). Established as a reactive product of the Vatican aimed at tackling the advancements in sexual liberalization and reproductive policies, the rhetoric has been developed within its policymaking (Garbagnoli 2016). In 2016, Pope Francis referred to gender theory as ‘ideological colonization’. The Pontifical Council of the Family has been most instrumental in the creation of new reactive policy discourses – it has advocated that ‘gender ideology’ aims to foster conflict between sexes, contests the nature of the sexes, and the natural hierarchy between the male and the female. The sexes have been divinely designed and gender is not a social construction (Butler 2019).

Over time the rhetoric of gender ideology has evolved and has been adopted by a variety of political actors, some of whom have been attempting to strip it of its religious history. The authors of *Gender as Symbolic Glue* (Kováts and Põim 2015) have identified the appeal of ‘gender ideology’ as an umbrella term, signifying oppositions towards a variety of measures. Hennig (2018) has argued that while gender ideology as an empty signifier embraces different ideologies and philosophies, it is nonetheless able to unite political actors in the rejection of gender equality

(measures) and of (the recognition of) sexual diversity. ‘Gender ideology’ rhetoric has thus also served the populist objectives of attacking the concept of identity politics. As Grzebalska et al. (2017, 1) claim in relation to Central and Eastern European politics:

Gender ideology has come to signify the failure of democratic representation, and opposition to this ideology has become a means of rejecting different facets of current socioeconomic order, from the prioritization of identity politics, over material issues.

In countries such as Poland or Bulgaria, the rhetoric of gender ideology has been operating with the term ‘gender’ in its English version, rather than the local language versions as applied within social sciences. This is a symptom of some actors’ objective to denounce policy developments related to perceived feminist or LGBTI agenda as ‘foreign’ and ideologically loaded (Darakchi 2019). Anti-West and nationalist discourses have been particularly useful for actors of nationalist and far-right projects, as they make use of gender ideology rhetoric with the objective of constructing the out-group of the ‘threatening other’ (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Žuk and Žuk 2020).

Some scholars have shifted from the focus on gender ideology rhetoric towards a more complex understanding of the rhetoric as a resource of members of a social counter-movement - i.e. a social movement which has developed to counter the achievements of feminist and LGBTI social movements (Roggeband 2018). For example, Corredor (2019) writes about ‘antigenderism’ as a counter action towards the emancipatory claims of the feminist and LGBTI movements. The actors can be understood as members of counter-movements, which are political phenomena targeting sites of power, most notably state structures, but also particular political elites, cultures, and dominant discourses (Taylor and Whittier 1995; Roggeband 2018). Therefore, we firstly propose to study gender ideology rhetoric as a tool (and resource) of the social counter-movement, which may be particularly useful in de-legitimizing particular discourses supported by gender studies scholarship.

While we describe the three tools of opposition most visible and reported on by the media (academic de-institutionalization, the targeting of financial resources, and harassment/bullying), the recent scholarship on ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric and movement has been very modest in explaining why specifically gender studies scholars experience this animosity which plays out through political institutions. Looking back at the Vatican roots of the concept of ‘gender

ideology’, Paternotte (2019) has also argued that ‘science’ has been established to be a crucial playing field whereby the actors aim to attack the cultural and political hegemonic discourse of the ‘postmodern gender’. This is being mostly done by re-appropriating the language and possibly by vilifying the ‘studies’ which are to blame for it. The practice of ‘scientific de-legitimation’ of gender studies has been also described by Frey and colleagues (2014) who describe a variety of practices of ‘gender enmity’. These have been targeting gender studies scholars and scholarship in Europe from outside of the academic environment, but also within it. These practices include journalistic gender enmity, ‘guardians of scientificity’ – pundits opposing gender studies research by claiming it is not ‘scientific enough’, Christian fundamentalism (gender studies research is anti-Christian), anti-feminist and right-wing actors (Frey et al. 2014).

Nevertheless, reflecting upon Paternotte (2019) and others, we argue that in order to understand the fate of gender studies vis-à-vis the advent of the ‘anti-gender’ rhetoric and the far-right and conservative backlash, we also need to look at the epistemic positionality of gender studies scholars and scholarship and to understand their regional specificity. As already mentioned, the lack of institutional support of gender studies scholars within the academic epistemic communities needs to be counted in as a contributing factor to the practices of budget cuts, harassment and de-institutionalization, which we have already mentioned. In the following section, we look at the lacking support more closely as we touch upon the culturally and socially engaged nature of gender studies scholarship.

Doing gender studies: respectable and welcome?

Addressing questions about conservative and far-right’s attacks upon gender studies scholarship, Apperly (2019, 1) posits the following:

[G]ender studies promote a more fluid understanding of self and society, in particular by recognizing gender as something shaped and interpreted by a given social order, as opposed to an immutable biological fact. In questioning traditional concepts of identity, sexuality, and kinship, gender studies therefore destabilize the far right’s simple narrative of a native ‘us’ and an alien ‘them’.

Sprague (2016) argues that feminist scholars have been attempting for decades to go beyond privileged standpoints protecting patriarchal or capitalist structures. He points out that these

scholars have been asking about the degree to which causal processes and their consequences vary with different intersections, including race, gender, and class. By doing so, Sprague argues that gender studies scholars have been problematizing what has previously been ‘invisible’, by doing studies of what is missing:

questions that have not been asked, groups that have not been problematized, social settings in which some categories of people are not present, assumptions that have gone untested”
 (Sprague 2016, 223).

In the same vein, Petö (2018) claims that gender studies are inherently irreconcilable with the preoccupation of the Hungarian government with demographic policies ‘supporting middle class families’. The Hungarian government is in this spirit only interested in women as mothers and carers, thus upholding a particular patriarchal framing of wellbeing, which is also why it has been funding some initiatives and avoiding others (Lilleslåtten 2018). Thus the critical nature of gender studies scholarship is irreconcilable with the so-called ideology of ‘familialism’ (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2019) promoted by authoritarian ‘anti-gender’ political elites.

However, it is not only the critical and reflexive nature of gender studies scholarship towards society or the state, which allows for the backlash. The current opposition towards gender studies scholars and scholarship may be studied from the perspective of epistemic status of gender studies outside and within academia. By epistemic status we understand the degree to which and terms in which a particular knowledge claim or entire field is recognized as fulfilling the requisite criteria to be considered credible and relevant knowledge (Do Mar Pereira 2017). Furthermore, a closer look at the dynamics of local academic epistemic cultures - sets of practices, arrangements and mechanisms bond together by necessity, affinity, and historical coincidence which, in a given area of professional expertise, make up how we know what we know – i.e. the cultures of creating and forming knowledge (Knorr Cetina 2007). For example, the study of the epistemic cultures of Central and Eastern Europe would allow us to see the broader picture of the positionality of gender studies, which has been problematic since the former authoritarian regimes. The institutionalization of gender studies through separate programs in Europe has been limited (Paternotte 2019). In the region of Central and Eastern Europe, It has been in particular hindered by the former regimes. Since the 50s, critical social sciences were considered to be a bourgeois pseudo-science (Oates-Indruchová 2008). During the periods of State socialism and in the region,

gender was an acceptable subject of concern exclusively within the context of class analysis (Do Mar Pereira 2017). In the meantime, gender studies have been developing within Western humanities, social sciences, and even STEM for over four decades (see e.g. Sprague 2016). The experience not only from the CEE region shows that institutionalizing gender studies in higher education thus requires a liberal political environment (Irvine 2004; Ahmed 2017). Some social sciences, such as political science, have been developing with the direction of independent and critical disciplines detached from the state ideology in the region only since the 90s (Malová and Miháliková 2018; Valkovičová and Hardoš, 2020). Centers of gender studies research started popping up in the decades following the fall of the Iron curtain - 1992 in Poland and 1991 in Prague (Einhorn 1995; Cviková and Juráňová 2009). This has been happening with extensive influence of the Anglo-American sociological tradition and the aid of activist discourses – for example in the process of institutionalizing vocabulary of the studies (Petö 2019.).

With regards to the epistemic status of the gender studies scholarship within and outside of academia, Do Mar Pereira (2017) argues with regards to the Portuguese context that in some countries gender studies have been problematic because they signify the global hegemony of Western culture or the compliance to ‘westernization’. In order to mobilize sentiments against the allegedly disconnected Western/European liberal elites, conservative and far-right actors have sought to portray gender studies scholars as agents of a threatening and alien ideology. In some cases, scholars were even denounced as ‘Brussels bureaucrats’ (Apperly 2019). Such a strategy can be ascribed to the objectives of ‘securitization of the society’ – i.e. presenting particular individuals as national threats, which has been previously also described by Petö (2019) with regards to the current Hungarian authoritarian tendencies. By positioning different groups of individuals as plotting ‘out-group’, be it the LGBTI community, or gender studies scholars, the narrative of threatening ‘gender ideology’ agents can work to strengthen the collective narcissism of the ‘in-group’ (Marchlewska et al. 2019).

The narrative of the scholars as ‘gender ideology’ agents fits well within the existing debate on the epistemic positionality and status of gender studies within academia. In 2017 Do Mar Pereira argued:

Scholars who have specialized in gender studies are finding that their career paths are hampered by the nature of the research which despite often widespread international

recognition still tends to be branded as militant and therefore implicitly as unscientific” (Do Mar Pereira 2017, 36).

Young researchers in gender studies are facing a variety of issues. According to research conducted among them (see Boulila, Cheung and Lehotai 2019), 21% experienced research-related difficulties that had to do with epistemic challenges of being a gender researcher, or the lack of mainstream credibility of gender studies. Do Mar Pereira (2017) has written about the perceived intrinsic epistemic inferiority of gender studies which has been documented not only within her own study and which occurs in formal and informal settings – sometimes constituting a form of intellectual harassment.

Claims of gender studies being unscientific, the neoliberalization of academia (also described by Aavik, Riegraf and Nyklová 2017; Bădoi 2019), and the attacks in the wake of far-right electoral gains have challenged the position of the discipline. These difficulties include a systemic lack of institutional recognition, which links to a deep-rooted suspicion towards feminist epistemologies - the prevailing idea that feminist knowledge is unfit for academic purposes (Boulila, Cheung and Lehotai 2019). The recent ‘Grievance Studies Hoax’ affair orchestrated by Pluckrose et al. (2018) aimed to draw attention to perceived poor academic standards of certain fields of research and also specifically targeted gender studies, for example, illustrates this. The authors submitted a series of bogus papers to a number of journals in cultural, gender, sexuality, queer and fat studies. After a number of those papers were accepted and published, Pluckrose and colleagues contended their hypothesis to be confirmed. The response of the academic community was mixed. The most glaringly disqualifying aspect of this attempt was the lack of a control group. Still, this was not enough to dissuade many academics from endorsing the misguided effort on social media and elsewhere. No less, the damage had been done, and the ‘hoax’ continued to be widely covered and discussed in the media. Afinogenov (2018, 1) has commented on the incident candidly and pointed out that

the educated public makes a decision based not on the scientific merits of the hoax but on the relative orthodoxy of the hoaxer and hoaxee. In effect, the result of the trick is decided in advance by the power relations of the field.

Concerns about the scientific credibility of gender studies can stem from a variety of biases. With their research in the Czech academic communities, Nyklová, Cidlinská and Fárová (2019)

recognized different types of bias which affect the institutionalization of gender studies within the discipline of International Relations and which they have divided into three categories – symbolic, institutional, and individual. According to the authors, these different oppositions impact the careers of individual researchers and their academic trajectories. Such oppositions also contribute to the construction of gender studies scholars as a problematic ‘out-group’. Key and Lawrence Sumner (2019) found evidence of segregation of gendered research topics in political science. Their study has shown that not only do women systematically focus on different research topics than men, but also that these topics are less likely to be published in ‘top political science journals’ (Key and Lawrence Sumner 2019). The data demonstrates quite clearly that women are significantly more likely to research race and gender (Nyklová, Cidlinská and Fárová 2019). It stands to reason that if gender studies departments (where mostly women or LGBTI people work) focus precisely on issues of gender, that the male dominated field would consider them outliers.

Stanley (1997) posited with regards to Western academia already in the late 90s that *“feminists are ontologically outsiders, ‘other’ to the academy“*, as they tend to be considered within the community as radical (Stanley 1997, 6). Similar conceptualizations of gender studies scholars in academia as ‘outsiders’ have been developed by Ahmed (2010, 2012) who speaks of these scholars as ‘feminist killjoys’ or ‘affective aliens’ - i.e. as individuals who critique institutions (be it dominant research paradigms or procedures of reporting sexual violence at universities). Thus they tend to be perceived as inherently problematic - gendered and politicized individuals (Henderson 2019). By doing so, the actors (or aliens) appear to be displaying an ‘inappropriate affect’ (i.e. anger, or disappointment) when they are for example pointing out racism or sexism (Ahmed 2010b).

By opening what she calls ‘unhappy archives’, Ahmed (2012) studies the academic organizations as affective atmospheres, whereby ‘happiness’ or ‘positivity’ are understood as the affective orientation of the organization. The ‘feminist killjoy’ emerges as a challenge, or a resistance to the idea of happiness, which is to pervade the organization. As such, within organizational structures, the ‘feminist’ (i.e. gender studies) is understood as a troublemaker¹:

¹ Ahmed (2012) claims that the ‘institutional passing’ of a scholar is crucial. To her, this means the survival in an institution, the development of one’s career and its progression. According to Ahmed these depend upon the permissiveness and the welcome the scholars experience within their institutions. For some scholars this may mean the need to refrain from critiquing the institutions and organizational structures, the objective to avoid such conflicts

Feminists, by declaring themselves feminists, are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good, but as the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy spoils the others' happiness; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness. In the thick sociality of everyday spaces, feminists are thus attributed as the origin of bad feeling, as the ones who win the atmosphere, which is how the atmosphere might be imagined (retrospectively) as shared” (Ahmed 2010b, 581).

As Ahmed claims, the failure to appear to be happy on the part of feminist scholars is read as sabotaging the affective orientation of the organization. As such, feminists are assigned ‘*the difficult category and a category of difficulty*’ (Ahmed 2010b, 581).

Arguably, the thriving practices of sidelining gender studies scholars within academic communities may be spilling over, aligning with and legitimizing the conservative and far-right backlash currently experienced by gender studies scholars. The lack of institutional or community support within academia should be understood as a contributing factor to the practices of deinstitutionalization, budget cuts or harassment. Scholars of other disciplines who harbor bias against gender research may even support or encourage governmental clampdown on academic freedoms by positioning themselves as those non-problematic vis-à-vis their gender studies colleagues. We should not forget that academic epistemic communities are not groups of individuals locked up in their offices. Bias and gender enmity towards the scholarship and scholars can be a practice of the organizational climate also involving and affecting students, who later on leave the university to pursue policy jobs. To help forward the institutionalization of gender studies and hamper potential governmental clampdown (which may later advance beyond gender studies as seen in Hungary), academic communities need to look at their own biases and practices, which may be inspiring political actors to attack the scholarship or make scholars into the ‘proxy’ of their ideological narratives.

Discussion

Attacks on universities are spreading across Europe, resulting in reduced institutional autonomy, a shrinking space for academic freedom, and a widespread devaluation of

and thus increase one’s proximity to the institutions and other scholars. This may mean that women choose not to do gender studies, queer studies, or be ‘feminist killjoys’ in organizations. Passing can also be about trying to be less noticeable.

researchers' interventions in public and political debates. In this context, attacks against gender studies appear as a first step toward wider campaigns against critical knowledge and similar attacks have been observed on topics like migration, Islam, the Far Right, the history of the Holocaust, and climate change. (Paternotte 2019, 1)

Above, Paternotte forecasts a gloomy future for universities and academies as the centers of critical thinking if the current trends take over. According to the author, the attacks on gender studies should be foremostly understood as attacks upon critical thinking and the autonomy of academic institutions enshrined in democratic principles. We must also be careful to spot when the anti-feminist rhetoric of gender ideology is clad in the neoliberal discourse of efficiency, which has been used not only in Hungary. The argument of 'not being viable enough' has been the one which has been used against the institutionalization of gender studies time and time again (Ahmed 2012).

With this text, we explored the oppositional agenda towards gender studies scholars and scholarship firstly by discussing the concept of epistemic cultures which surround gender studies scholars and scholarship (Knorr Cetina 2007). As Ahmed (2010b) claims, the myth of the scholar as an objective, neutral observer who leaves the field without influencing the data, untouched by the research process, has been often criticized by especially feminist/gender studies scholars. Yet it is precisely the engagement and the oftentimes self-declared activist nature of gender studies scholarship which is currently helping conservative and far-right political actors to construct gender studies as a convenient proxy (Engeli 2019).

With regards to the abovementioned events taking place all over Europe and beyond, we believe this is especially not the time to take academic freedom for granted. One of the ways in which we can appreciate its value is by fostering solidarity with our fellow researchers within and outside our own field of research. Current (social) sciences and humanities are built on the premise of co-operation, which means that scientists are not autonomous within their work. Quite the contrary, they seem to be bound by the relations of epistemic dependency (Szapuová 2009), whereby peer review and mutual recognition play a crucial part. Scientific communities therefore need to be understood not only as groups applying a mutual scientific paradigm, but also as groups which share common epistemic cultures and epistemic practices. As such, today's scientists are more dependent on their community than we would be prone to assume. Gender studies scholars seem to be dependent upon the support of their out-group colleagues now more than ever.

While there has been very limited and mostly sectional research on the epistemic cultures and practices (Knorr Cetina 2007) within the academia of the Central and Eastern European region pertaining to gender or queer studies, the scholarly debates on the epistemic status of gender studies in the era of the so-called gender ideology rhetoric are abundant all around Europe. Gender studies scholars are resisting and joining forces, while also debating the changing status of the scholarship and the challenges it brings to their academic careers. Within the past two years, the majority of European international conferences on gender studies in social sciences included panels or workshops on gender ideology rhetoric and resistance to populist and far-right attacks upon academia. These included conferences of academic associations such as the AtGender Conference 2018 (Göttingen), European Conference on Politics and Gender 2019 (Amsterdam), European Consortium for Political Research 2019 General Conference (Wroclaw), European Geographies of Sexualities Conference 2019 (Prague). Scholars have been coming together to share their atrocity tales of practices sketched above: academic de-institutionalization, targeting of financial resources and harassment/bullying. It seems that if one wants to familiarize herself with the variety of practices aimed at restricting gender studies scholarship, she only has to attend the coffee breaks of the international gender studies conferences. What is more, it also seems that academic solidarity with gender studies scholars is also visible at international conferences of social science and humanities associations not specializing in gender studies, which are the elite networks of academic epistemic communities. Visible, but also material solidarity and support of gender studies scholars must come from their colleagues, academic elites in their respected fields be it any academic discipline from literary criticism to social work.

As Ahrens claims in this regard:

Politics in 2018 is, across the globe, rife with overt and seemingly powerful resistance to principles of gender equality, to feminism, to justice. In an era where the very notion of expert knowledge is under attack, the necessity to respond as a community of researchers has to be part of a wider counter-resistance to an insecure, unequal world” (Ahrens et al. 2019, 9).

Such cross-disciplinary support of the research community is essential in cases such as the Romanian one. As many English-speaking online news outlets informed about the newly enacted restrictions in higher education, Romanian scholars were heard for their criticism of the censorship

(Gherasim 2020; Tidey 2020). While the headlines spoke of ‘Romania banning gender studies’, it was essential that students and scholars of humanities and social sciences explain that the legal amendment does not only impinge on gender studies, but that the ban to teach gender theory affects other disciplines and signifies serious suppression of academic thought. In cases such as these, members of the academic epistemic communities need to be present in mainstream media to ‘set the record straight’ and defend academic freedoms.

One more way to provide support to the colleagues of gender studies at research and teaching institutions and in academia more widely is to be aware of their status of ‘affective aliens’ who critique institutions whereby they tend to put themselves into threatening positions (Ahmed 2010, 2012; Henderson 2019). As actors who display the inappropriate affect and undermine the affective orientation of organizations or even epistemic communities, these scholars are troublemakers who are oftentimes labeled as ‘the difficult ones’. Recognition of their diversity work is crucial and can be essential in preserving our academic institutions not only critical, but also self-reflexive and caring. And last but not least, we should not forget about the aspiring scholars at the MA levels or early-career researchers who may experience or witness bias or other forms of oppositions within their academic communities, organizations or may feel threatened by the agenda of political actors within their countries. It is not only for the continuity of the scholarship which depends upon them, but also their wellbeing as diversity workers, which needs to be considered and cared for.

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