

Four reasons why Gender Studies has changed because of illiberal attacks, and why it matters

Andrea Pető

ABSTRACT: *In her article, originally published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Andrea Pető analyzes the contradictory approach to gender studies. Gender Studies scholars cannot complain about the lack of wider social interest in their work. Faculty members' email boxes are filled with emails inquiring about their research, invitations to public debates in different media outlets and comments for the press. At the same time, Gender Studies scholars are targeted by »online public harassment,« and have found themselves being listed by name as enemies of the nation on front pages of national newspapers, with the aim of silencing and humiliating academics. These systematic and systemic attacks on Gender Studies are part of anti-gender campaigns associated with the anti-gender movement, a nationalist, neo-conservative response to the triple crisis (migration, financial and security) induced by the global, neoliberal world order. It uses gender as symbolic glue to create alliances of hate and exclusion, to redefine what is »normal« and create liveable, desirable alternatives for voters to liberal democracy. These anti-gender movements, while attacking Gender Studies as an academic discipline, are gaining much support all over Europe. The lessons we learn from this present »paradoxical recognition« of gender studies are, not surprisingly, also full of paradoxes..*

KEYWORDS: *gender studies, anti-gender movements, gender as symbolic glue, higher education*

HOW TO CITE: *Pető, A. (2023): Four reasons why Gender Studies has changed because of illiberal attacks, and why it matters. In: Berliner Blätter 88, 111–115.*

I was still living in Budapest,¹ unlike now, in exile with the Central European University (CEU)² in Vienna, when one morning I went to buy my fresh bread at the local bakery. Two construction workers were having their breakfast, and while waiting for my turn I overheard their conversation. To my great surprise, it concerned different definitions of gender covered in a tabloid article they were discussing while sipping their coffees. It was a moment that Éric Fassin would refer to as »paradoxical recognition« (Fassin 2016, 178).

Recently, Gender Studies scholars cannot complain about the lack of wider social interest in their work. Faculty members' email boxes³ are filled with emails inquiring about their research, invitations to public debates in different media outlets and comments for the press. At the same time, Gender Studies scholars are targeted by »online public harass-

ment«, (Pető 2020, 16) and have found themselves being listed by name as enemies of the nation on front pages of national newspapers, with the aim of silencing and humiliating academics.

These systematic and systemic attacks on Gender Studies are part of anti-gender campaigns associated with the anti-gender movement, a nationalist, neoconservative response to the triple crisis (migration, financial and security) induced by the global, neoliberal world order. It uses gender as symbolic glue to create alliances of hate and exclusion, to redefine what is »normal« and create liveable, desirable alternatives for voters to liberal democracy. These anti-gender movements, while attacking Gender Studies as an academic discipline, are gaining much support all over Europe.⁴

The lessons we learn from this present »paradoxical recognition« of gender studies are, not surprisingly, also full of paradoxes.

Gender Studies as pop-science

Due to the anti-gender campaign, Gender Studies« knowledge production has changed forever as Gender Studies has become a popular science. Politicians, public intellectuals and even workers having breakfast in a bakery are making self-assured and authoritative public statements on professional issues such as sex education or the curriculum of Master's studies, without any knowledge or training in Gender Studies. As Sara Garbagnoli has pointed out, books of Judith Butler and other Gender Studies scholars are now shelved in bookshops right next to anti-gender volumes, as if they had the same scientific weight in gender studies (Garbagnoli 2016, 200).

This is happening, paradoxically, during the resurgence of credibility of science and experts because of the global pandemic. This revival of trust in science has not remained undetected by illiberal actors, leading to illiberal state officials applying the very same toolkit of science in their fight against Gender Studies by citing a hodgepodge of surveys in an ad hoc manner, which allows them to undermine the relevance of gender research and its empirical findings, as well as the value and legitimacy of its scientific endeavours in general.

Change in academic authorisation

Parallel systems of academic authorisation are being developed by illiberal states. The illiberal state systematically destroys any other existing mechanisms of scientific evaluation, turning higher education institutions into performative formalities, and rendering them mere simulacra of the original institutions. While the polypore illiberal state⁵ hacks quality assurance via accreditation committees, it also mimics the neo-liberalised scientific evaluation system of indices. For example, due to recent modifications in the Collection of Hungarian Scientific Works (MTMT, *Magyar Tudományos Művek Tára*⁶), where all Hungarian academics must upload their published work along with citations, publication in a Q1 journal (the highest internationally ranked journal) is only worth as much as a publication in any of the Hungarian scientific journals. The same is happening in Poland:⁷ during the recent modification of the evaluation system, international, peer-reviewed English language journals have been replaced on the list of required publications with local, Polish journals, whose profiles and, of course, editorial boards are pro-government. During this hacking of the quality assurance system, the previous consensus on publishing in English

Four reasons why Gender Studies has changed

in scientific journals has also been called into question. This is signalling a change in scientific orientation; instead of the global North, scientific discourse now rather orients to the East, to Russia and China. This changing geopolitical focus is paradoxically, implementing a twisted de-colonisation of science: making it less democratic and less inclusive which? instrumentalises the post-colonial discourse and uses it for its own hegemonic purpose. For Gender Studies, where the »Holy Grail« had been being published among others in *Signs*,⁸ *Feminist Theory*⁹ or *The European Journal of Women's Studies*,¹⁰ all those achievements have suddenly been made to disappear.

From Gender Studies to Family Studies: lessons learned

What can all those Gender Studies scholars do when their field, their work and their publications are labelled not only worthless and useless, but also dangerous, and they cannot or do not want to immigrate to where the shrinking global academic space will soon not offer academic employment anyway (Pető 2016, 297). As the authentic study of Gender Studies is blocked by the »science policy« of illiberal states, and the study of family policy as a scientific endeavour and a professional lifebelt has been established, many scholars have seemingly resurfaced as experts in family policy or family studies. This follows the development in Russian Gender Studies, where Gender Studies programmes are becoming family studies programmes (Moss 2021, 17 – 36). This strategy of adaptation is well-known to middle-aged intellectuals from the communist era: one may pursue a career and publish, only *if* one is not openly against the regime. Corvinus University of Economics and Business in Budapest (one of the first privatised institutions in Hungary)¹¹ was formerly a Gender Studies pioneer through the work of its sociology department. The very first Gender Studies centre¹² was founded there, and a stream of young, gender-sensitive political and social scientists graduated from it. A new English-language MA in Economics of Family Policy and Public Policies for Human Development (in Hungarian for distance learning) has now been established there as part of the government's family mainstreaming concept, with the contribution of the most well-known feminist gender experts. In Poland, women's studies and research on women have experienced a new revival (Mrozik 2010, 25), not without theoretical and political risk (Grzebalska 2017, 40).

Indexing academic freedom – a mission possible?

The European scientific infrastructure was unprepared for the emergence of illiberal science policy and illiberal scientific institutions,¹³ which look like any other scientific institution, but in reality are not.¹⁴ This is clearly illustrated by the fact that the Hungarian Accreditation Committee obtained its European license¹⁵ from ENQA¹⁶ only after CEU was forced into exile¹⁷ and the two-year master's program in Gender Studies was struck from the accredited study list.¹⁸ These illiberal institutions use the neoliberal language of excellence, competitiveness, impact, social outreach, and indices; however, they are all fraudulent and empty. One possible strategy has been proposed in the recent report by Scholars at Risk:

»Academic freedom is not acknowledged in any of the influential university rankings. As a reference point for scholars, university administrators and governments, datasets such as the Shanghai Ranking, the *The Higher Education World University*

Ranking, the QS World University Ranking or U-Multirank are in a unique position to improve academic freedom by altering incentive structures for students, scholars, universities and governments.« (Kinzelbach et al. 2020, 25)

It is questionable whether bringing in academic freedom as an index in the neoliberal rankings would contribute to meaningful change, and, more importantly, would prevent the spread of illiberal governing practices in higher education. The question is what the impact will be if the institutional attitude to Gender Studies the measurement of academic freedom will be globally.

Gender Studies as an academic discipline found its »paradoxical recognition« via the attacks of illiberal forces. This institutional and academic vulnerability of Gender Studies is increasing because of re-evaluation of their position in the field of science. Government propaganda has deliberately undermined the social and symbolic legitimation of Gender Studies, which has only exacerbated the panic and bitterness felt among those involved (Pető 2018, 155 – 156). Debates between feminist scholars have intensified and have often copied and internalised the style and tone of the attacks by the illiberal state. This professional communication has become ruthless, and instead of constructive and much needed debates we rather see attacks. Time will show if the present reactivity of gender studies can be transformed to proactivity for the sake of a better science for all of us.

During these years of gender studies contestation as an academic discipline new insight has been gained. Bridging political and scientific cleavages, previously thought to be theoretically unbridgeable, has led to collaborations between secular and religious political forces and academics, which have turned out to be the most promising for creating spaces of resistance to illiberal politics. It is unusual within the field of Gender Studies that practice precedes theory, but the swift and unexpected developments due to the anti-gender movements have brought unforeseen results in developing intersectional and transversal theory towards »deep coalitions« (Lugones 2003, ix).

Notes

- 1 The paper was published first at <https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/05/03/4-reasons-why-gender-studies-has-changed-because-illiberal-attacks-and-why-it-matters>.
- 2 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/03/dark-day-freedom-george-soros-affiliated-central-european-university-quits-hungary>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 3 <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/exorzismus-per-e-mail-ungarns-angriff-auf-die-geschlechterforschung-ist-ein-angriff-auf-die-freie-gesellschaft>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 4 <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210217-french-academics-blast-minister-s-warning-on-islamo-leftism>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 5 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-hungary-and-poland-ha_b_12486148, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 6 <https://www.mtmt.hu>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 7 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/poland-trying-destroy-universities-independence-warns-rector>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 8 signsjournal.org.
- 9 <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/fty>.
- 10 <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw>.
- 11 <https://apnews.com/article/hungary-business-government-and-politics-europe-education-9b76d-ce30164e77be1c3a2fe47db8bfa>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 12 <http://gender.bkae.hu/index2.html>.

- 13 <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/wissenschaft-fuer-den-plastikwuerfel-in-illiberalen-staat-en-entsteht-gegenwaertig-eine-wissenschaftliche-scheinwelt>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 14 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/universities-repressive-states-hollow-copies>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 15 <https://hook.hu/hu/felsooktatas/sikeresen-zarult-a-magyar-felsooktatasi-akkreditacios-bizottsag-nemzetkozi-akkreditacioja>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 16 <https://www.enqa.eu>.
- 17 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ceu-hungary-ignatieff-1.492982>, accessed on 02.02.2022.
- 18 <https://www.boell.de/en/2017/04/10/report-trenches-debate-around-teaching-gender-studies-hungary>, accessed on 02.02.2022.

Bibliography

- Fassin, Éric (2016): Gender and the Problem of Universals. Catholic Mobilizations and Sexual Democracy in France. In: *Religion and Gender* 6/2, 173 – 186.
- Garbagnoli, Sara (2016): Against the Heresy of Immanence. Vatican's ›Gender‹ as a New Rhetorical Device Against the Denaturalization of the Sexual Order. In: *Religion and Gender* 6/2, 187 – 204.
- Grzebalska, Weronika (2017): Introduction. Writing Women's History in Times of Illiberal Revisionism. In: *Baltic Worlds* 10/4, 39 – 41.
- Kinzelbach, Katrin, et al. (2020): Free Universities. Putting the Academic Freedom Index into Action. Report. Berlin.
- Lugones, María (2003): *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes. Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. Lanham.
- Moss, Kevin (2021): Russia's Queer Science, or How Anti-LGBT Scholarship is Made. In: *The Russian Review* 80/1, 17 – 36.
- Mrozik, Agnieszka (2010): Gender Studies in Poland. Prospects, Limitations, Challenges. In: *Dialogue and Universalism* 20/5 – 6, 19 – 29.
- Pető, Andrea (2016): How are Anti-Gender Movements Changing Gender Studies as a Profession? In: *Religion and Gender* 6/2, 297 – 299.
- Pető, Andrea (2018): Without Remedy. Lessons Learned from Gendered Analysis of the 2018 Hungarian Elections. In: *Femina Politica* 27/2, 152 – 158.
- Pető, Andrea (2020): Academic Freedom and Gender Studies. An Alliance Forged in Fire. In: *Gender and Sexuality* 15, 9 – 24.

