

## **"Difference, Diversity, Diffraction. Confronting Hegemonies and Disposessions"**

Opening speech of the 10th European Feminist Research Conference and joint annual conference of Atgender (The European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation) and the Gender Studies Association of Germany (FG Gender), 12-15 September 2018 in Göttingen (Germany)

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This year, our annual conference is under the roof of the European Feminist Research Conference (EFRC) that since 2009 has been organised by Atgender in cooperation with local partners. The theme of the 10th EFRC is "Difference, Diversity, Diffraction", pointing to the many different – also conflicting – disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches within the trans-/interdisciplinary field of Gender Studies. The subtitle "Confronting Hegemonies and Disposessions" displays one major goal of gender research: Doing research that makes the world a more democratic place. The book of abstracts displays – on its more than 500 pages – the breadth and depth of gender research.

If we take the year 1968 as a moment, researchers within Women's Feminist and Gender Studies have been producing knowledge for at least 50 years. The European Feminist Research Conference was first organised in 1991 in Aalborg (Denmark). Despite the fact that there are already institutionalized structures such as this conference, Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies – including the fields of disability, intersectionality, postcolonial, queer, trans and even more studies in an ever-developing research field – are still an emerging field of research. The acceptance of Gender Studies within academia has increased over the years. The situation is not the same everywhere. Acceptance in Sweden is, for instance, higher than in Germany or Greece (at least as long as the Sweden Democrats are not taking over). Nevertheless, in some circles, Gender Studies still has low epistemic status. In some areas of academia, Gender Studies is still met with scepticism. This is not only our subjective gut feeling, but has been thoroughly investigated by scholars – some of them among us – like Maria Pereira (2017).

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If we look into the history of other academic research areas, we can see scepticism at their beginning as well. I just want to give one example: mechanical engineering. Around the turn of the 20th century, mechanical engineering – now one of the 'hard' sciences – was still struggling for acceptance. As we learned from Tanja Paulitz (2010), engineers were faced with the assumption that their work was only technical and not academic at all. Hence, their place within academia was also questioned once, though for different reasons. Where they were perceived as being 'technical', Gender Studies is sometimes seen as 'political'. Recently, this analogy crossed my mind, and I wondered whether there could be a parallel placing of Gender Studies as one of the really tough sciences in future.

Feminists have conducted intensive research on what 'political' can mean in academic knowledge production. The relationship between power and knowledge is a key research area for gender scholars. What we gained from this research so far is that there is no knowledge production outside this power-knowledge connection and, thus, no knowledge production that is entirely apolitical.

One good example for this is the beginning of history as an academic discipline. As Falko Schnicke (2015) showed us, historians in the 18th and 19th centuries were eager to prove that historians could only be male. Even though, from their perspective, the academic historian needed qualities that had been associated with womanhood – such as emotions and imagination – women were declared incapable of true historical research because they would be overwhelmed by their emotions, whereas men were able to master them. Thus, historians tried to define history as a male science in order to exclude the possibility of women historians. Would anyone nowadays still argue that this move was not politically motivated?

Both history and mechanical engineering developed as androcentric research fields in which women have been marginalised. Women's, Feminist and Gender Studies have positioned themselves as opposed to androcentric attitudes. They have challenged the androcentrism in engineering and history, and all other academic fields, and made it transparent. They also developed alternative knowledge strategies – which Sabine Hark (2005) described as 'dissident participation'.

Not only did some research fields develop as masculine. The research itself has been shaped by a dominant male perspective. In the history of science, feminist researchers not only analysed the 'special anthropology' (Honegger 1991) that was established to limit bourgeois women and exclude them from public. They also found that working class women were confronted with even harsher treatment. To give just one example, investigated by Katja Sabisch (2007): in the 19th century, prostitutes were used for medical experiments on syphilis. Furthermore, anti-racist feminist researchers



investigated racialised knowledge production that sexualised Black women and created a distinction between Black and bourgeois white women. The list of such politicised knowledge production could be continued endlessly, including the pathologisation of trans people and the devaluation of disabled people.

The problem is that these historical developments still resonate in academic knowledge production. Gender Studies scholars have undertaken this historical research, and they also investigate social relations in which exactly this kind of knowledge still plays a role. Knowledge that is prone to support the use of power of some social groups over others and that, hence, is unfit for democratic societies based on equality.

There are more political issues, such as the question of who chooses which research is worthy of funding. (We will discuss this in the first roundtable today.) Other questions include: How are knowledge traditions developed? Who chooses which inventions and discoveries will be remembered? Why are women researchers and other "Others" still being written out of the histories of the sciences as active participants?

In other words: What does it actually mean when someone says Gender Studies is political or too political? I would argue that within democratic societies, the political relevance of any research should be reflected upon. We should want to improve our social world on a global scale with fundamental research in order to enhance the possibilities of participation for everybody.

How can we imagine any social or humanities research as not being of political relevance? These fields either investigate social relations or cultural representations. They analyse how our societies are constructed, reflect critically on the status quo and, thus, necessarily have political relevance. However, there is a difference between being of political relevance and being political in any direct sense or even pursuing a hidden political agenda.

Some of the basic research within Gender Studies has led to technical innovations that are highly valued nowadays, however, most focus on innovations of our perspectives on the social world. They are a driving force in the development of social relations. As such, Gender Studies fundamental or basic research is not per se political but of political relevance.

Where the engineering sciences were confronted with suspicion because of their technicality, Gender Studies is sometimes met with suspicion because of its political relevance. Where mechanical and other engineering fields developed as masculine research areas, Women's, Feminist and Gender



Studies made this androcentrism one of their fields of critical reflection. And where mechanical engineering was confronted only with academic scepticism, Gender Studies has recently become the target of political ideologues.

Political and religious ideologues fighting against Gender Studies react to changes brought about not only by the women's and sexual liberation movements but also by economic and technical globalisation and neoliberal changes – as Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer (2017) pointed out. However, one of the reasons Gender Studies is as contested as it is may well be its political relevance. Another reason might be that the term 'gender' has been functioning as an empty signifier for nearly everything people might complain about.

In our call for papers and overall concept, we already included right wing populism and its focus on gender studies: We planned round tables and a keynote who might address the funding situation of Gender Studies as well as such attacks. However, we did not anticipate what happened this summer, when a European government actually announced plans to abolish Gender Studies from their universities.

To come to the end of my speech: I believe that we are experiencing a decisive moment: Will academic scepticism towards Gender Studies finally be overcome as a result of right-wing targeting? Will academics recognise that the targeting of Gender Studies is merely a precedent for a broader interference in academic freedom? Or will they align themselves with right-wing populist targeting of Gender Studies – either by actively pursuing it themselves or just watching it, disinterestedly and passively. The international protest against the Hungarian plans to abolish Gender Studies has given rise to some hope that the first might be the case and that the general level of acceptance of Gender Studies might rise higher than it already has.

There is hope that one day in future we will become as tough a research area as others already are! Another sign for such a development is the fact that this conference is fully funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony (MWK). The funding allows us to be more inclusive, make gender research more visible and show that we are debating theories instead of agreeing to one imagined gender ideology, as right-wing populists have been suggesting.

I want to stop here and close with one nota bene: the OpenGenderJournal, a new peer-reviewed open access journal has been developed as the permanent publication site of our annual con-



ferences. Everybody presenting at this conference is invited to hand in articles based on their presentations to the journal. You'll find more information about it in the book of abstracts.

In this sense, I wish everybody an exciting conference!

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