

**Women and Gender Studies Section of the DGS (German Sociology Society)**

**Statement on "Addressing Anti-Feminism"**

14 February 2015, presented at the annual conference of the  
Fachgesellschaft Gender in Bielefeld, Germany

**Strengthening Feminist Critique of Society and Science**

The following outlines and contextualizes a few of the patterns of attacks on gender studies in the media and in academia. These attacks are being made at a time when the extreme right-wing movement is reconfiguring itself and is also becoming increasingly more visible. Increasingly anti-feminist statements are also being uttered in the same breath as racist attacks. The current debates in the media on what is known under the catchphrase "anti-feminism" are situated within this context. Populists, and also scholars, are standing up, claiming they have the guts to finally say what others have allegedly tried to sweep under the carpet. Although the arguments are constructed in different ways, they share an anti-feminist sentiment. They are especially interested in attacking feminist scholarly traditions that have done research on the relationship between gender and social inequality, power and domination.

In Internet forums and in op-ed pieces, the first thing that comes into view is that "the" discipline of gender studies and "the" politics of gender equality are equally accused of being unscientific and ideological, meaning that both gender studies and working for gender equality are thrown together without any differentiation.<sup>1</sup>

What is missing in the *media debate* is a discussion of the cultural and social construction of gender. This debate is simply dismissed, based on the assumption that it goes against the common sense of the gender binary and the dichotomy of nature and culture. At the same time, transdisciplinary research which points out that gender varies on an intercultural and historical

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<sup>1</sup> An informative publication on the topic is: Regina Frey, Marc Gärtner, Manfred Köhnen, Sebastian Scheele (2014): *Gender, Wissenschaftlichkeit und Ideologie*. Vol. 9. Schriften des Gunda Werner Institute, ed. Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Second Expanded Edition, Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung

level is simply ignored.

The mere use of the term "gender" in the media does not give any indication that its status as a category of scientific inquiry is to be taken seriously and discussed; the same is true for attacks within academia. For the most part, the way it is handled is highly biased and assumes ideals of scholarly and scientific work that the detractors themselves do not adhere to when addressing the issue.

The polemical attacks *within the media* aim to delegitimize the field and the colleagues working within this field. A chief accusation is that actors in the field are primarily invested in the political interests of a specific group. This fundamentally denies gender studies, its scientific integrity and precludes any kind of informed discussion of the field's concerns. Similar argumentation patterns are also to be found—albeit in other forms—in *academia*. Here too there is a charge of unethically advocating political interests, which is often coupled with undervaluing colleagues and their research.<sup>2</sup> Using somewhat more "refined" but nonetheless distinction-based criteria, in addition to accusing gender studies and feminist scholars of instrumentalizing science to further the interests of certain groups, their methods are altogether charged with being unscholarly. Further, the epistemological location of gender studies scholars is made to seem naive by critics claiming that the feminist researchers are not even able to see the "gendering" taking place in processes of knowledge production within their own field.<sup>3</sup> Such criticisms clearly demonstrate blind spots: by accusing others of being normative and making false political statements these critics put themselves on a rhetorical and ideological slippery slope. Within this context, accusations that gender studies and feminist scholars disregard the cultural aspects of gender relations within research reveal more about the ignorance of the critic than

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Buchholz, Günther (2014): Gender Studies. Die Niedersächsische Forschungsevaluation und ihre offenen Fragen. WiWi-Online.de, Hamburg; online: <http://www.wiwi-online.de/fachartikel.php?artikel=601>; accessed 01 Jan 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hirschauer, Stefan (2014): Wozu Gender Studies? Ein Forschungsfeld zwischen Feminismus und Kulturwissenschaft, in: Forschung und Lehre Nov., 2014; online : <http://www.forschung-und-lehre.de/wordpress/?p=17324>; accessed 04 Jan 2015.

anything else.<sup>4</sup>

This form of symbolic struggles concerning the attitude toward the epistemological location of science and its relation to politics is nothing new. They have been taking place since the 1970s, when women's and gender studies were first founded. For women's and gender studies, the methodological engagement with the social situatedness of research and of the relationship between research and political interests have been at the center of their concern. Gaining insight into processes of the gendering of knowledge organization and the scientific apparatus of ideas and concepts was crucial for differentiating between different areas within the field. In the 1990s, the epistemology debates on the relation between sex and gender were paradigmatic for the expansion of the field and demonstrated that gender studies understood itself as an emancipatory academic field that openly discussed the relationship between situatedness, knowledge and normativity.

This characteristic, however, is not unique to gender studies research. It stands in a long tradition of transformative scholarly and scientific practices. While politicizing the social question was a prime driving force for the establishment of sociology, the politicization of the gender question was also a key generator for the development of a vast variety of different areas of research in gender studies. Sociology and feminist theory are related through the specific ways in which they enter a social field - both research social relations that the actors experience as discriminatory and exclusionary, to critical and humanist scholarly traditions. Both are concerned with socio-cultural and -structural mechanisms that prevent equal opportunities, that is, equal access to key social resources within the political, economic, cultural and social realms. They both address the symbolic order along with the knowledge formations and discourses used to legitimize these relations. When critics increasingly take the opportunity to speak about women's and gender studies research as being discriminatory towards men, in addition to

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

claims of normativity and exclusive group interests,<sup>5</sup> it seems that the primary issue at stake is symbolic power struggle for recognition, economic capital and the reproduction of status beliefs and ideals about social orders regarding sexuality and heterosexuality. Within this context, it is no coincidence that the majority of attacks on researchers working in these areas turn out to be tirades of hate. Women's and gender studies research fundamentally questions the traditional and currently extremely ideologically loaded common understanding of sex and gender along with the associated apparatuses of sexuality and gender. The fact that this causes social controversy is nothing new. What does seem new, however, is the contempt with which this controversy is engaged.

Such articulations of antifeminism as well as trans- and homo-phobia are by no means singular phenomena. The defamation of gender researchers and the disparagement of gender equality politics must also be seen as connected to, among other things, cultural racism increasingly coming to light in hate speech and disparaging acts. Throughout Europe, media debates and public demonstrations reflect the fact that the bourgeois mainstream is expressing its "discontent," which inequality research attributes, among other things, to the neoliberalization and commercial exploitation of society. Indeed, modernity theory observes that this "unease" goes hand in hand with anti-emancipatory and anti-progressive, that is reactionary impulses. In this setting, categorically dismissive attributes become more virulent and vehement, such as xenophobia.<sup>6</sup>

In our view, it is crucial that a critical sociological lens be applied in order to grasp this growing "common sense" in its entirety, in which sexism, homo- and transphobia as well as racism are entwined. This mode of scholarly work explicitly also includes critically engaging with anti-Semitism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> One example where gender equality policy is expressly addressed is in the "position paper" of the Dresden branch of the German organization Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Michael Kohlstruck/Peter Ullrich (2015): *Antisemitismus als Problem und Symbol. Phänomene und Interventionen in Berlin*. Berliner Forum Gewaltprävention 52. Landeskommision Berlin gegen Gewalt. Berlin

With this in mind, we advocate for strengthening feminist critique of society and science. A step in this direction could be taken at the next **Annual Conference of the Section from 3 - 5 December 2015 in Giessen**, which is planned as an international conference with the working title "**Feminism Reloaded: Contested Terrain in Times of Anti-Feminism, Racism and Austerity.**"