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“Don’t you gender me”!? Anti-Genderism and Contexts*

The greater the successes of gender equality policies, gender research and in diversity management, the more vehement the rhetorical devaluation by their opponents: Hence, the current journalistic tendency of anti-genderism can be labeled, but in the hermeneutic sense this discourse and its targets are therefore not to be understood. In particular, the authors of daily columns and commentaries have upgraded rhetorically during the last years. Incitement against gender studies and gender policies exists even in anti-feminist forums and blogs. The debate has turned into a generational question of different media that seem to pit the analogue conservatism in book form against the activism of the *digital natives*. This paper attempts to take stock from the literary perspective and analyze the discourse from a poetological point of view.

Discrediting Gender Studies

Recently, the meaning and concept of *gender* has drawn much attention in academic discussions, in news and entertainment media as well as in social networks. It is about the concept, the consequences and social-political scope of the academic notion of *gender*. Even gender studies have run into a discussion that is being conducted in new arenas. And not just that: This discourse has gained momentum and led to the popularization and polarization in terms of *gender* (cf. Fleig 2014: 9f). On the one hand, one can observe a kind of “anything goes”, because it almost seems to be as if the old emancipatory objectives would be redundant. Women and men enjoy equal rights in the constitution, and many objectives of the old 70s feminism have been achieved. Young women and young men do not see themselves determined by their sexual identity; social media such as Facebook offer a “user-defined” gender identity besides those of male and female. Even legal discourse departs little by little from traditional occidental gender binarism and no longer tries to force intersexual children and youth towards a disambiguation of sex (Nieberle 2015). Fictional narratives in literature and film, especially American TV series like *A Modern*

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Family (20th Century Fox TV, since 2009) and *Transparent* (Amazon Instant Video, since 2014) tell of self-determined people of all ages living out their lifestyles across generations and unhindered in the beautiful and colorful consumer world of post-essentialist popular culture. It is evident that realities such as described in sociology do not correspond with this and above all that emancipation does not mean gender equality.

On the other hand, the rhetorics of re-naturalization are currently being set up and have already assumed a drastic vehemence of disturbing proportions. Women and men, and above all their children, would thus be threatened in a normalized bourgeois society by a so-called Gender Ideology that would make it impossible in the future to live their respective natural gender. Meanwhile an interesting semantic notion of the verb “to gender” was added to the German language. “Gender mich nicht!” (“Don’t you gender me!”) means the order to avoid the presumably needless and dangerous perspective of gender mainstreaming and also gender studies on a person or an issue. A few years ago, there were only brochures with anti-gender propaganda.¹ But these fears, in the meantime, seem to justify threatening gender scientists personally. Deans’ offices and university administrations feel compelled to emphasize with appropriate reactions their own scientific integrity and loyalty with the university teachers as it happened in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany (cf. Hark/Villa 2015a: 10f).

Sociology, historiography and the linguistic and literary sciences belong to those disciplines that since the 1960s have commendably shaped first women’s and gender research, then gender studies and most recently diversity studies. While the natural sciences and medicine, as is generally well known, have always defined gender identities and with that also established different notions of femininity and masculinity, they have in the meantime proceeded to reflect critically on their own power of definition. To prepend these remarks in no uncertain terms: Gender Studies are not about the negation, affirmation or suppression of gender difference, but rather the analytical question of its making – to its historical development, its social relevance, their epistemic, ethical, aesthetic and also economic consequences. For this reason, there is always the option of describing the current gender discourse as a postmodern continuation of the European *Querelle des femmes* about the position of women and men in society and the arts which has been led since the 14th century. Already in the 16th century, philosophers discussed their theories of gender equality and differences. The old disputes and arguments from the variants of equality or difference feminism turn up again and exactly in anti-genderism texts. However, this analysis is not primarily based on historical traditions, but on the rhetorical fabrication of a discourse. In what way and under what conditions does this discourse form against gender studies?

¹ Cf. <https://jungfreiheit.de/gender/> (access on 10.2.2017).

The massive discredit on gender studies has already been countered in some retorts, seeking in part an evidence-based argumentation and expressing themselves to some extent in the feuilleton in a similarly incensed tone of indignation. However, this does not suffice for a scientific debate. An example of this futility is the repeatedly formulated but incorrect claim regarding the alleged ‘genderisation’ of German, Austrian and Swiss universities which would indicate an allegedly greatly increased number of gender professorships. It is correct to say, however, that the number of chairs and professorships has not increased appreciably since the year 2000. For many years, the statistical tables have been freely accessible in the data collections of the Margherita von Brentano Center at the Freie Universität Berlin.² Because tangible fears can hardly be dispelled, but diffuse fears of statistics less so, however, no decisive value can be attached to such a numerical factuality. The rejections and corrections of discrediting remarks are therefore not feasible as the only possible critical method; they appear rather unsuitable in the long run because they are not adequately received and reflected in the polemical and pejorative contexts. Turning one’s attention to the discourse, therefore, its dynamics and its protagonists, alternative analysis and descriptive methods seem to emerge. Therefore, it’s most important to primarily take up the principles of representation. What is possible from a *discourse analytical* perspective in order to understand, describe and classify the anti-gender discourse?

In the anti-gender discourse the same characters haunt us repeatedly – according to the individual analyses in Hark and Villa’s 2015 book on “anti-genderism” (cf. Hark/Villa 2015a, 11f): On the victim’s side is the endangered child of concerned but powerless parents who, under the influence of gender studies, has to expect massive personality disorders. On the offender’s side, the homosexual pedophile who has free rein due to the easy-going dealing with any sexual practice can be found time and time again, and at the same time the so-called genderists: leading the way the powerful, tax-funded gender chair holders who propagate their ideology contrary to nature, who prescribe a daily linguistic change and can have an unbridled influence on generations of students. Finally, it is rumored that leftist equality politicians weaken the population in their natural identity with the instrument of gender mainstreaming prescribed by Europe, and thus want to reintroduce the default family socialism of the former GDR. (Not to mention the little traffic light figures who, starting in Berlin as ‘Ampelmaennchen’, are conquering the symbolic world and at the same time threatening the socio-cultural order.) These characters

² See the tables on <http://www.database.mvbz.org/docs/tabellarische-darstellungen.pdf>. As colleagues calculated, this constitutes in relation to all other professorships at, for example, German universities a proportion of barely 0.5% of all W 3 and W 2 professorships with a gender denomination and (predominantly) gender partial denominations (cf. Hark/Villa 2015b: 22).

appear – depending on their critical context – on behalf the reform of the education plan in Baden-Wuerttemberg, in connection with the criticized institutionalization of gender studies at German universities, with so-called same-sex marriage, with measures in gender equality policies and gender mainstreaming. The child, the pedophile, the gender professor and politicians, given the frequency and prevalence in the gender debates, become both *allegorical figures* and *narrative characters* that lend shape to the statements in gender discourse. They are both real and observable persons, identified and characterized from a sociological perspective (Schmincke 2015); on the other hand, they already function as collective representations of individual experiences and actions. They represent the alleged erosion of our educational system and the Western research tradition, the squandering of taxpayers' money, the uncertain boundary between nature and culture and last but not least, the feared moral degeneration of our times. They embody the unwanted change that because of its speed and its unforeseeable consequences needs to be stopped with emotionally charged polemics. The metalinguistic phrase “One will *still* be allowed to say that!” uses such a conservative performative.

It is necessary to add another character to this constellation, because it operates on the boundary between allegorical and symbolic function. It does not fit conveniently into the culprit-victim scheme because it acts as an author figure on the borderline between the inner text and the outer text at the same time. Namely, the columnists and the female columnist have hardly drawn the scientific attention on their important role in the anti-gender discourse. This is mainly because they traditionally write for features, thus merely touching on academic and journalistic science areas, can, however, neither uphold nor represent their discourses. With enlightening and entertaining intention, these columnists publish regularly in major daily and weekly newspapers; at the same time, they publish critical nonfiction.

On the “anger of understanding”

One of the first German columnists was Volker Zastrow in 2006 who commented on gender studies in the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung* (FAZ) and with that gained a certain advantageous position with that comment. In 2013, the discourse quickly gathered speed, first on January 23rd with the article “*Der Herrenwitz*” by the journalist Laura Himmelreich in the German newsmagazine *Stern* about the politician Rainer Brüderle and almost at the same time with Anne Wizorek's Twitter campaign under the hashtag *#aufschrei* (– at which the jury of the Grimme Prize later chimed in commendingly and with federal president Gauck in contrast scoldingly). In February, this was followed by Harald Martenstein's

articles in *Zeit Magazin* about dirty jokes and rhetorical images of a victim, uni-sex bathrooms in March and gender studies in June 2013 which in turn provoked numerous replies. With these contributions to the discourse on feminism and gender a journalistic debate ensued, fueled by the possibilities of social media and increasingly polarizing its participants (cf. Frey et al. 2014, 16f). Shortly thereafter, blogs, postings, tweets and re-tweets either countered or underscored the articles in mainstream media. With the accusation of sexism against the British Nobel Prize winner Tim Hunt who, at a conference for science journalism spoke disdainfully about *the* woman in laboratories in general means and countered by female scientists worldwide under the hashtag *#distractingly sexy*. The international dimension of this topic was used as an opportunity for gender critical discussions in journalistic practice (Pörksen 2015).

Sporadic articles by journalists frequently appear that on the one hand critically examine the aims and methods of gender studies in a general criticism (without, of course, having studied or worked in this field) and on the other hand maintain ‘the’ gender studies would disavow the difference between the sexes contrary to all empiricism (for example, Weber 2016). Neither platitude is valid and therefore by the way, also scientifically irrelevant; on the contrary, they are evidence of the lively formation of opinions and topoi which in turn are criticized. Meanwhile, these frozen clichéd perceptions of gender studies have gone public in entertaining TV formats.³ There’s no need to point out that the oversimplified presentation does not do justice to either gender equality policies or gender studies and that editors obviously do not care at all. These populist mechanisms of discrediting would certainly be just as effective for astrophysics, nutritional sciences or Ukrainian studies, insofar as it applies to these subjects and methods.

In hegemonic discourses the focus is always on the power of the definition and use of symbols. Whether Eva Hermann, Gabriele Kuby and Beate Kelle blame gender studies and gender mainstreaming for the decline of the social order or whether on the other hand the rapper Form now parodies talk of “gender madness”, whether Robin Detje writes about the “swelling ick factor” of his male writing colleagues or whether Stefan Niggemeier engages in public skirmishes with Harald Martenstein: There is no doubt that the boundaries of opinion cannot be drawn according to the gender of the authors. Constructions decide, in fact, about the conditions of the manner in which a statement is made. Thus, in the gender discourse we see primarily a dispute between different media usage profiles. Kelle, Martenstein, Mattusek, Zastrow et al. market their articles primarily in

³ Cf. *SatireGipfel* with Dieter Nuhr (ARD, SatireGipfel, April 2013), *Hart aber fair* with Frank Plasberg (ARD March and September 2015) and *Mario Barth deckt auf!* (RTL, October 2015).

printed literature, books, magazines and newspapers. They publish in analog media according to the rules of authorship, although their texts are reused online in digitized form. The critics of the gender critics, on the other hand, publish mainly genuinely on the Internet; they consider themselves *digital natives* and utilize blogs, Facebook, Twitter and online forums, although feminist bloggers Anne Wizorek as well as Laurie Penny, for example, chose to use their opportunities for book publications.

The epistemic category of gender as well as gender as a socio-cultural genus are both in journalism and science first and foremost a linguistic phenomenon – precisely because in the discourse in speaking or writing it must remain in the alleged biological ultimate grounding. Accordingly, Harald Martenstein took the following position in an interview with the Austrian Presse about the gender spelling with the capital I (Binnen-I in German): “I won’t do it. In case someone wants to force me, I’ll change my profession! (...) Sometimes I genderize in my articles, so that the women don’t feel left out. Then I’ll write ‘Nazi-murderesses’ instead of ‘Nazi-murderers’.” (Translation of Mayer/Martenstein 2015) In violating the aptness, a rhetorically necessary appropriateness of speech, the interview ensures attention, especially when published under the sensational title of “Nazi-murderess”. This statement is far removed from the orthographic discourse, even though nothing is said about female offenders under National Socialism.

Yet a further distinction belongs to the medial and gender-related differences in this discourse because the age of the authors is often linked to their statements. The following binarism results: the phalanx of young, angry internet feminists on the one hand and the old, white, just as angry heterosexual analog publicists on the other hand. This differentiation oscillates on the boundary between homo- and heterosexuality: authors’ names like Matthias Matussek, Akif Pirincci and Volker Zastrow are linked with homophobic hate speech and the theory of a homosexual conspiracy by the pan-European Establishment; established white heterosexual publicists support them reflexively and turn at the same time against the humorless young internet feminist who shouldn’t react that way to dirty jokes (cf. Kelle 2013).

Without going into detail about the paradoxes and inconsequent lines of thought in this discourse, two primary pseudo-scientific arguments can be mentioned. First allegation: Would Gender Studies ignore the verifiable methods and results of science, they would need to first deal with logic, theory and empiricism. This requirement cannot be found at any point in the inverse conclusion, namely that the natural sciences and technology could turn to the processes and results of Gender Studies (at the same time it is not necessary to underscore that this is already happening in academic life). Second allegation: Because the cognitive interests,

theories and methods of gender studies are not clear and understandable, they are not able to pursue plausible science. Or in the second option: Because the cognitive interests, theories and methods of gender studies are all too understandable and affect the realities of life too much, they cannot provide validated research results. In both variants, it is a positivistic and anti-intellectual primed self-empowerment (Schutzbach 2015) that is unthinkable in subjects with a specific set of symbols and its own grammar – theoretical physics, chemistry, biology and computer sciences. Thus, another problem manifests itself in the linguistic difference among the academic cultures because it arises also with respect to gender studies that frequently adhered pseudo understanding adjunct to the humanities in the non-academic dispositive (cf. i.e. Gabriele Kuby's poor understanding of Judith Butler's texts). In the case of a formulary the semiotic exclusion of readers is not a problem; but gender theory which is strongly connected to every day experience of human beings does provoke an "anger of understanding", as Jochen Hörisch (1988) described the hermeneutic urge of commentation.

The poetics of the feature article (minor genres)

In the case of the feature article to which most of the anti-gender contributions belong – the column, the commentary and the op-ed article – this "anger of understanding" is not an obstruction, but even extremely productive and constructive for this genre. These texts stand in the aesthetic tradition of restructured Europe after the French Revolution, specifically in the tradition of Heinrich Heine's poetics of the small form. The feature article encompassed the mercantile, significant short texts under a typographically unbroken line on the side which dissociated it from political journalism. As in many respects "the other one" in relation to their own daily writing, the authors of feature articles always placed value on the aesthetic drafting which, despite their political irrelevance, secures the necessary attention (cf. Kernmayer 2012: 509-523). One adduces stylistic means from literary small forms – for instance from an aphorism or an anecdote – however remaining with the article within the realm of a genre-poetic hybridity. The heading "Schlecht, schlechter, Geschlecht" (roughly: "Bad, Worse, Gender") of a column by Harald Martenstein (2013a) plays around with a charmingly modified climax that arises out of an alleged etymological connection (Kluge 2011). The formula functioning properly in its poeticism – which means that the connotation rules over the denotation – was immediately cited in further articles and in turn freely modified: "schlecht, schlechter, Martenstein" (Kirova 2013) or "schlecht, schlechter, gender" (Korbik 2013). However, the quotes did not achieve the density of the climax.

Although the articles argue plausibly, in their attention seeking headings they exhibit neither marked assonances nor do they follow elusively employed rules of word formation. This example demonstrates the “radical, ornamental style gesture” with which Günter Oesterle characterized the feature article (Österle 2000: 236). In addition, the proximity to fictionality belongs to the poetological catalogue of criteria produced by allusions and quotes of fictional texts. With his heading “Anschwellender Ekelfaktor” (The Swelling Ick Factor) Robin Detje followed the title of Botho Strauss’ contested essay “Anschwellender Bockgesang” (The Swelling Goat Song), initially published in 1993 in the *Spiegel* and thereby contributed to the impending erosion of values. In contrast to his headline Detje begins his remarks with a parody on the introduction to the Asterix magazines. At the same time, he drops some names of the anti-gender alliance (Ulf Poschardt, Harald Martenstein, Jan Fleischhauer, Matthias Matussek):

“This is because all Germany is occupied by lesbian left-wing party poopers of the Multi-Kulti party – by gender-studies bitches, who even won’t dress up for their selfie postings in the internet. They want to determine how to be addressed, they want to confiscate the gender identity of our kids, and they don’t want men to stand while peeing. A small white heterosexual gang of journalists don’t give up offering resistance. We want to have closer look on this village. We want to call our local heroes Ulf and Harald, Jan and Matthias, because they would do the same.”⁴ (Translation of Detje 2014)

A next poetological feature of the small form is subjectivization (cf. Kernmayer 2012: 514ff). The marking of one’s own speaker position, articulated with the experiences of the I in the text, often comes with the reflection of one’s own speaking role in the discourse. This self-referential speech stages the self both as a character and author of a text (cf. i.e. Martenstein 2014a). This subjectivization of the article differs from the generalizable subject position of the essay. As Kernmayer points out (2012: 516), the feature texts in the feuilleton present the perception of a subject which is not the sovereign subject of the enlightenment anymore but an ‘I’ which tests different ways to get into touch with its surroundings. This

⁴ „Denn ganz Deutschland ist von lesbischen linken Spaßbremsen aus dem Multikulti-Lager besetzt – von Gender-Studies-Zicken, die sich nicht einmal mehr schön machen, wenn sie Fotos von sich ins Internet stellen. Sie wollen bestimmen, wie wir sie anreden, unseren Kindern die Geschlechteridentität wegnehmen und uns Männern verbieten, im Stehen zu pinkeln. Ein kleines weißes heterosexuelles männliches Journalistendorf hört nicht auf, Widerstand zu leisten. Das wollen wir uns genauer ansehen. Ulf und Harald, Jan und Matthias wollen wir die Dorfhelden nennen, weil sie das auch gerne so halten.“ (Detje 2014: o.S.)

specific post-enlightenment subject designs one's self sometimes as political, contemplative, playful, or consumerist self, but always as an aesthetic self. The columnists' use of "I" is subject to an understanding of one's role that should not be confused with the authentic "I" of the author or the person of Martenstein. A character named Martenstein explicitly formulates it as follows:

"A writer who is for years in this column business has to invent a development of one's self, an artificial character. (...) When I started with my column, I was at the end of my forties. Then you can't perform the angry young man anymore. Therefore, I performed the angry old man. This I can do, until I'll have to pass away. For this role, you are never too old."⁵ (Translation of Martenstein 2015).

Hence, a classic self-reflection of one's own "mask of declaration" exists, as Peter Utz describes the function of a feature writer (Utz 2000: 158). These "masks of declaration" cannot be interchanged at will, but rather are dependent on media, fashions, social processes of change, mercantile aspects and similar external factors. However, this subject position is anything but stable.

As a preliminary result, it can be said that in the so-called gender debate a discussion cannot be carried out solely on a factual level. One cannot therefore win opposing views in the discourse because they do not comply with argumentative patterns, but aesthetic rules instead. Non-literary criteria like 'truth', 'plausibility' and 'complexity mediation' cannot even be sacrificed; they do not represent the condition of a statement in the discourse in the fabrication of feuilleton-style texts. In these texts and their margins allegorical and symbolic figures organized in binary opposition can be detected. Moreover, it can be summed up that on a discursive level a polarization of the protagonists can be observed, dynamically organized and linked in continuously new formations to the categories of age and gender. Thus, it is clear that it is not, in fact, a confrontation of chauvinistic men of a certain age on the one hand with feministic women of the younger generation on the other hand. On closer examination, it is related to the loss of significance of the traditional feature article that has summarily represented the 'other' for a long time: the subjective, formally free, aesthetically shaped thinking that – since about the 1830s – was able to generate its own effectiveness out of its poetic auto-functionality and subjectivity. This effectiveness is at stake

⁵ "Wer das allerdings über Jahre betreibt, dieses Kolumnen-Business, muss ich eine Entwicklung ausdenken, eine Kunstfigur. (...) Als ich mit der Kolumne anfang, war in Ende vierzig. Da kann man keinen zornigen jungen Mann mehr geben. Also gab ich halt den zornigen alten Mann. Das kann ich machen, bis ich ins Grab steige. Für diese Rolle ist man nie zu alt." (Martenstein 2015)

when the other way of thinking, the freedom of form and the radical nature of subjectivity migrates to the virtual world of online publishing. The concept of authorial scripturality is stirred up in the conceptual orality in internet-based communication; this means that the impression of spatial and temporal immediacy increases thus enriching the culture of debate (Beißwenger/Storrer 2008). Given the poetological findings, exceeded in terms of its hybridity only by the extremely unstable subject position of the author behind the corresponding “masks of declaration”, the question is raised of what holds this gender discourse in the journalistic public sphere together. Is there a stable dimension in this collection of incoherent, paradox, radical subjective, polarizing statements in the journalistic gender discourse at all?

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