



ILLUSTRATION: KATRIN STENMARK

# GENDER – MERELY A “SOCIAL FACT”?

THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
NEO-AUTHORITARIAN  
US/THEM DICHOTOMIES

by Sabine Hark

“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.” Simone de Beauvoir wrote this in her epochal work *The Second Sex*.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more than any other sentence, this famous dictum captures what can be considered as the momentum of second-wave feminism in the Western world. De Beauvoir was convinced that neither “biological” nor “psychic or economic” factors determine the shape “that the female person assumes in society”.<sup>2</sup> In the sense of the existential-philosophical premise that essence results from existence, de Beauvoir understood the existence of women as *post-essentialist*, as we would say today; that is, as a “social fact”, created by society (Emile Durkheim),<sup>3</sup> “woman” is a social invention.

“If a girl appears to us to demonstrate gender-specific behaviors long before puberty and sometimes even in early childhood,” concludes de Beauvoir, it is not because “obscure instincts drive her to passive, coquettish, and maternal behavior”.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, almost “from the beginning” other people intervened “in the child’s life” and irrefutably drummed into her what her calling should be.<sup>5</sup> It is the whole of civilization<sup>6</sup> that turns a woman into a – dependent – woman. In saying this, de Beauvoir was not denying those differences that we have learned to understand to be “natural” or

“biological”. For her, separation of the sexes was a “biological occurrence, not a feature of human history”.<sup>7</sup> Certain differences between man and woman would “always exist” – this was her often repeated conviction.<sup>8</sup> What was important for this radical thinker on the topics of freedom and equality was, on the contrary, to show that these differences do not determine the inescapable fate of women and therefore do not decide what their position in society should be. And so women are not destined from birth to be “women” – and therefore destined to subservience or “otherness”.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR wrote *The Second Sex* about seventy years ago, a few years after the end of the Second World War. To be sure, she asked herself even then whether there “was really a

problem”<sup>9</sup> that would justify writing a feminist book of this kind. Maybe “enough ink had flowed” already in the “debate on feminism”.<sup>10</sup> After all, it was not even clear whether “women even exist,” or perhaps, whether “every female person [...] must of necessity be a woman”.<sup>11</sup> However, anyone who takes notice not only of the disputes about academic gender studies that have been raging for about the past ten years, but also of the battles against a “gender ideology” or “gender theory” that is supposedly undermining

## abstract

That gender cannot be reduced to an ahistorical fact is a widely researched insight of multidisciplinary gender studies. In theory as well as in political practice gender is thus generally understood as a post-essentialist, reflexive, and contingent concept. Against this backdrop the essay asks for the German context in what way and with which intentions, neo-authoritarian discourses and movements explicitly not only reject, attack and defame gender as concept, but also reclaim it. I will argue that under the cipher ‘anti-genderism’, a discourse has been formed that can first be described as a neo-fundamentalist discourse and that is secondly explicitly used to construct racist, neo-authoritarian us/them-dichotomies. The so called anti-gender forces become thus identifiable as the element of a dispositif, which is at the core and subject to further clarification of anti-democratic nature.

**KEY WORDS:** gender discourses, gender studies.

the founding principles of Western culture not only in Germany, but also in countries such as Poland, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, France, and Italy, cannot avoid ascertaining that clearly enough ink has not flowed, nor have de Beauvoir's deliberations lost any of their explosive force. Her central tenet, that woman is a social construct, and gender therefore a "social fact", is still likely to cause irritation and confusion and lends itself therefore more than ever to an affectively highly charged politicization of various provenance. Regardless, under the term that US sociologist Erving Goffman once coined, with critical intent, a term that has mutated into the contentious concept "genderism",<sup>19</sup> a noteworthy Europe-wide alliance-in-spirit has come into being to fight this "gender ideology," which is purportedly as questionable as it is destructive of the founding principles of society.

### Dispossession

Intentionally, the spokespeople of this alliance in spirit reverse the meaning of Goffman's concept of "genderism" to its opposite, namely, to be a form of ideological totalitarianism that wants to force "us" all under a gender dictate. What's more, the concept of "gender ideology" has been deployed by neo-reactionary forces as a metaphor for the claimed insecurity and unfairness produced by the current socioeconomic order and is turned into a resource for the construction of an antidemocratic us/them dichotomy framed by racism. We can speak here of a form of "discursive dispossession", to use an expression coined by the sociologist Ursula Müller,<sup>20</sup> even though it should be said that neither gender nor the concept of genderism belongs exclusively to Gender Studies. This is what it is vital for us to understand – precisely this discursive dispossession, the exploitation of gender for the generation of anti-democratic us/them dichotomies. The paradox of this concept, gender, which stands possibly like few others for an attitude of reflexive contingency – one that is supremely democratic – can be taken into service for the staging of an emotionally charged and increasingly racist opposition between "the people" and "the establishment" seems to me at present to be symptomatic of dynamics that extend far beyond the field of gender in the political and social arena.

### Anti-Genderism: Alliance in spirit

If I speak of an alliance in spirit here, I am referring to a Europe-wide network, a loose but increasingly stable collection of more or less personally and/or institutionally linked persons, organizations, movements, and institutions. It includes, among others, the Vatican and major segments of the Catholic Church, religious and lay conservative NGOs, and evangelical Free Churches, as well as nationalist, right-wing parties such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany, *Front National* (FP) in France, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreich* (FPÖ) in Austria, the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* in the Netherlands, and *PiS* (Law and Justice) in Poland. In their party programmatic they all expressly oppose gender or "genderism", and they all maintain more or less strong connections with the current social movements in the racist, anti-democratic, and authoritarian spectrum, for example, with the *Identitären* or the Dresden-based movement *Pegida*. Moreover,

movements such as *La Manif pour tous* in France, which first mobilized against same-sex marriage but soon turned into a protest against the more general threat of "gender theory" being taught in schools, as well as neoconservative intellectuals, journalists, and writers, and even some feminists, have to be counted among its partisans.

What unites this alliance is first and foremost a common enemy figure – the aforementioned "gender ideology" or "gender theory". Further, a common and widely used tactic among members of these more-or-less loosely connected forces is the evocation of hyperbolic and fear-arousing discursive images such as the "end of civilization as we know it" if the "gender ideologues" succeed. Increasingly, and as already mentioned, they also invoke us/them dichotomies such as "we-the-people" versus the "gender-lobby in Brussels" or Gender Studies professors at German universities and abroad. What they mean by "gender theory" is deliberately never clearly defined and remains slippery. Hence gender ideology functions as an empty or free-floating signifier that can be shaped in radically different, even opposing ways, able to match different interests and political goals. Consequently, it can represent everything and anything, from aiming to destroy masculinity and femininity and the allegation that gender theory proclaims the freedom to choose one's own gender and sexual orientation, even "several times a day", to the reverse claim that Gender Studies wants to impose gender roles. Various it is also made to stand for the endorsement of LGBTIQ rights, from marriage equality and sex education to reproductive and adoption rights and Pro-Choice arguments, and even a ban of heterosexuality.

**IN SHORT**, "gender theory", by implicitly suggesting that there is a coherent body of scientific work known as such, becomes a synonym for some kind of conspiracy, aiming at nothing less than a cultural revolution in which biological facts about men and women will be denied and an indeterminate fluidity of gender will be promoted. In this context, "genderism" is constructed as a totalitarian project of social engineering similar to other totalitarian projects such as communism or fascism. Hence "anti-genderism" serves at least a threefold function. First, the forces gathered under this umbrella term can present themselves as the saviors of ordinary men and women, of Western civilization, and of mankind. Second, "anti-genderism" fulfills the function of symbolic glue for an otherwise quite heterogeneous spectrum of neo-reactionary forces. Third, it serves as a cover-up of a much bigger attempt to change the values underlying European liberal democracies. As such, "anti-genderism" is not just a feminist or gender issue, but the signal of a threat to liberal democracy itself – a Trojan horse carrying forces determined to end democracy "as we know it".

The mobilization of an us/them opposition between the people and the establishment, which is central to neo-reactionary politics, is essentially played out on the field of gender and sexuality, when they say for example that the Brussels gender-diktat is controlling the totalitarian reeducation to produce the "sexualized gender person". For example, the right-wing Catholic

journalist Gabriele Kuby promotes her book *Die globale sexuelle Revolution: Zerstörung der Freiheit im Namen der Freiheit* [The Global Sexual Revolution: Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom] on her personal homepage as follows:

**"In this book you will read what we are no longer allowed to say about the UN and the EU as controllers of the sexual revolution; major reeducation to produce the sexualized gender person; the political rape of language; the epidemic of pornography; the homosexual movement; sex education in schools and kindergartens; the slippery slope to totalitarianism in a new guise."**<sup>21</sup>

To understand the extensive reach of this paradox, that is, that although gender as emblem of the experience of contingency can have its meaning reinterpreted as the sign of a position that denies contingency – indeed, as the sign of totalitarian dominance – it is necessary now to call to mind, as briefly as possible, the thoughts of Goffman and others on gender and genderism.

### Gender as a category of knowledge

The sociologist Goffman understood gender quasi as the prototype of a social category and classification. Goffman writes: "In all societies, initial sex-class placement stands at the beginning of a sustained sorting process whereby members of the two classes are subject to differential socialization."<sup>22</sup> Without doubt "genderism" here is a concept of sociological critique. "It is not", Goffman explains, "the social consequences of innate sex differences that must be explained, but the way in which these differences were (and are) put forward as a warrant for our social arrangements, and, most important of all, the way in which the institutional workings of society ensured that this accounting would seem sound."<sup>23</sup> Thus gender here is no longer nothing more, but also nothing less, than a social classification, a defining frame, in which practice is put into effect. "And insofar as natural expressions of gender are natural and expressive," Goffman argues in *Gender Advertisements*, "what they naturally express is the capacity and inclination of individuals to portray a version of themselves and their relationships at strategic moments – a working agreement to present each other with, and facilitate the other's presentation of, gestural pictures of the claimed reality of their relationship and the claimed character of their human nature."<sup>24</sup>

**ACCORDING TO THE** US historian Joan W. Scott, gender points to the fact that we are dealing with "perceived differences between the sexes" that are based on knowledge.<sup>25</sup> Gender "is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences."<sup>26</sup> If *sexual difference* can be seen only in the body, as a function of our knowledge, it cannot be the causal basis from which the so-

cial organization of human cohabitation can be derived. In this connection Scott strictly advocated rejecting the established and the permanent quality of the binary opposition, a genuine historiography and the deconstruction of the constraints of gender difference. With this she developed de Beauvoir's recognition that "woman does not exist," making the production of the sexual difference itself the object of the analysis. Instead of asking about the situation of women, as Scott said somewhere else, we should investigate the processes of this differentiation. In doing this we would not assume that differences "that regulate our social relationships have always been or will always be the same".<sup>27</sup>

With this Scott moves the question of the ontology of gender into the field of knowledge. For we do not understand this question – or we understand it as little as, say, the question of "race" or sexuality – unless we take into consideration that the knowledge of those nature- and life-sciences that have designed the modern program of the heteronormative gender binary have for a long time been a part of this ontology. Thus it is imperative, according to Scott's argument, to analyze how the difference is produced and to decipher which components were brought into which sort of causal chain here with the result that gender and gender difference appear to be founded inescapably on biology.

Here the suggestion of the scientific researcher Donna Haraway that we should investigate how sexual difference itself is produced ties in directly. In *Gender for a Marxist Dictionary: The Sexual Politics of Words* (1986), Haraway suggests learning to understand sex and gender as instances of two different but very interconnected systems of knowledge. And a very important part of this is to give back to what presumably was given naturally, and therefore is without history – and this is probably sex, above all – its history and its mediality, its origins, even from science and economics, from technology and culture, from ideologies and practices. But that means nothing other than giving sex, just like gender, a material ontology – and this is the kernel of the post-essentialist paradigm in Gender Studies.

A connection of this kind between the ontology of sex and gender and systems of knowledge and institutional constructions such as family and relations, the conditions and manner of production, engineering and technology, juristic practices and media discourses, pictorial traditions and literary imaginations, and power systems and types of government, makes it impossible to postulate a nature preceding culture and history that is not of itself also the product of an articulation – the result of a contingent causal chain, of heterogeneous practices, materialities, phenomena, discourses, and knowledge – that itself contributes to the production of culture and history.

There is thus no direct path, and certainly no unilateral path, from sex, that is, what we commonly call biological or anatomical sex, to gender – the socially created or constructed sex.

**"THUS GENDER  
HERE IS NO LONGER  
NOTHING MORE,  
BUT ALSO NOTHING  
LESS, THAN A SOCIAL  
CLASSIFICATION,  
A DEFINING FRAME, IN  
WHICH PRACTICE IS  
PUT INTO EFFECT."**

Rather, it is precisely the other way round: sex has always been *gender*, as Butler's famous and much discussed thesis in *Gender Trouble* (1999) points out. And that is again nothing other than the elaborated version of the sentence that stood at the head of the second wave of feminism: de Beauvoir's insight from 1949, that we do not come into the world as *women* but *become women*.

### How a vocabulary of critique became synonymous with totalitarianism

While Goffman, Scott, and Haraway focused on connections among individual sexualized behaviors, institutional conventions, power relationships, and types of government, as well as types of knowledge, the representatives of the self-named Anti-Gender-Allianz employ de Beauvoir's insight, as we have seen, to mobilize against a supposedly totalitarian "gender ideology", so-called *genderism*. If I may repeat myself, supposedly this ideology either forces notions of gender roles onto people or intends to make people abandon such notions, and, all in all, aims to rob society of its natural founding principles – gender binary and heterosexuality. In Germany, discrediting the academic discipline Gender Studies as "excess", "ideology", "pseudo-religious dogma", or "anti-" or "pseudo-science" plays an important role – a discourse that in the meantime can also be found in the field of feminism itself; for example, see Alice Schwarzer and the feminist magazine *Emma* that she publishes. The discussion is about "gender madness" and "gender flim-flam"; Gender Studies wanting to force on us its crude and dangerous ideology, which is out of touch with reality; how "gender women" are seeking the spotlight; their illegitimate usurping of professorships; and also the fact that Gender Studies ignores both scientifically proven and objective facts and "healthy human understanding".

There are numerous deliberate reversals and affective mobilizations, systematically produced misunderstandings and red herrings, and attempts to defame and discredit. Yet those who are leading the defamatory discussion understood completely what the term *gender turn*, introduced by Goffman, Scott, Haraway, and others, implies, that is, a post-essentialist understanding of gender. On the other hand, equating the insight that gender, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for example, argued, is not nature but the "result of a historical work of perpetuation"<sup>23</sup> with an anti-academic approach is intentionally misleading.

AT FIRST GLANCE, equating things in this way may indeed seem absolutely logical, insofar as a naturalistic and scientific notion of knowledge must deny a post-essentialist paradigm outright as unscientific. In and of itself, this is neither a new criticism nor one that calls for an urgent reaction. However, what makes it current for science and also socially relevant is the fact that (and

how) the discrediting of this specific notion of anti-science is linked right across Europe to right-wing populist-fundamentalist rhetoric and dynamics. For – and this is what is really problematic here – the criticism of anti-science becomes powerful only as an element of a dispositif that is in essence, and subject to further clarification, of an anti-etatist or possibly populist nature.

In regard to Gender Studies, this newly revived, purportedly anti-state populism comes up on the one hand with a mobilization, not only rhetorical, against indoctrination controlled ostensibly from above – either by the Brussels EU bureaucracy or the state, or even just the gender professors – and on the other hand with the demand that the academic discipline – Gender Studies – be "socially beneficial", and, implicitly, immediately comprehensible for all taxpayers in terms of both content and method. In addition, the presumption of the religious, delusional, or even totalitarian character of Gender Studies is ubiquitous. Again and again an identical set of assertions is presented, which all have in common the premise that Gender Studies are not a science. They are pseudo-science, ideology, dogma, religion, worldview, or hocus-pocus. On the whole, what science is exactly is not explicit, at all elaborated, or backed up by sources. Rather, it is understood overwhelmingly as mundane, commonplace, in a seemingly undiscerning positive sense – as an objective examination of facts (preferably understood as "natural") that are inherently the way they are. An examination that everyone should

be equally capable of carrying out, independently of prior knowledge or other context. Because, they say, Gender Studies has neither accomplished this nor appears to seek to do so in the future, it has so far presented no kind of "knowledge" in the sense of objectively presented facts. Therefore, according to the possibly circular argument, in the case of Gender Studies we are not talking about science.

Despite this, according to one of the repeated accusations, Gender Studies is disproportionately influential at universities and colleges – a

genderization of universities has taken place<sup>24</sup> – and the huge squandering of public resources is being denounced. Systematically, the impression is being given that millions, even billions, of public monetary resources are flowing into a political ideology that not only is disguised as science, but in addition is trying to indoctrinate the young people at university. The alliance is frequently up in arms because like "pigs at the trough" the "genderistas" and "female professors" are getting fat "through the universities, financed by the hard-earned money of us all".

However, these tricks have little in common with the actual conditions at German universities, as the following figures make clear. In 2013 about 35,000 professors were teaching full-time at universities and colleges in the Federal Republic of Germany. This includes all salary grades. Of these approximately 35,000,

only about 150 are partly or fully engaged in Gender Studies or gender research. That is about 0.4 percent of the total number of professorships. Anyone who so wishes can believe that this 0.4 percent is an emerging or already completed "genderization". And it is not entirely implausible that there are those who would make such an argument. Unperturbed by these numbers and facts, "gender-critical" authors claim in response that Gender Studies is part of a feminist *raison d'état*, or perhaps, part of the "gender lobby".

This argument – that Gender Studies is part of a *raison d'état* – is an important example of rhetorical discrediting. It can be linked in many ways to the populist arguments and reasoning of anti-statism, that is, of a critical attitude toward the state as it is touted in libertarian-conservative and right-wing contexts. Thus calling Gender Studies a *raison d'état* is systematically coupled with nationalist and anti-European attitudes or, as the case may be, formulations, especially with reference to the code word "Brussels". As early as the summer of 2006, Peter Lattas wrote this in the *Junge Freiheit*:

**"The average citizen generally does not learn about the tireless actions and weavings of the lobbyists and ideologists in the Brussels Eurocracy until it is too late. [...] The concept [gender] originated in the feminist Lesbian movement and is based on the assumption that 'gender' is not determined by biology but is a social concept and therefore can be changed. In this view heterosexuality is not a normal state but a contrived notion that is passé and must be vanquished."**<sup>25</sup>

### From anti-feminism to anti-genderism

In itself this is indeed not new. For criticism of the supposedly natural sexual ranking is as old as this ranking itself. For a long time, essentializing has indeed been the core element in the strategy deployed against gender: nature has been and continues to be the privileged bulwark against history, politics, and sexual democracy. More than a few people have always been of the opinion that feminists, queers, and others were going too far with their questioning of the natural order of things. Conversely, as Claudia Honegger has shown in *Die Ordnung der Geschlechter: Die Wissenschaften vom Menschen und das Weib*,<sup>24</sup> it is precisely the natural sciences, newly emerging in the nineteenth century, especially anthropology, medicine, gynecology and anatomy, that increasingly claimed dominance for the truth realm of gender and claimed to be able to decipher the essence of the gender difference, while in fact they were pursuing in particular the "biologization" of femaleness. Not least, they offered the modern age a handy answer to its dilemma, that having asserted that all people are naturally equal, be able to justify the (not only) political inequality of women. The unambiguous message of this program, which is still having its effect today, is that what we can become in terms of gender and what social conventions result from this is predefined by nature.

Scientifically transforming and naturalizing gender differ-

ence in this way was to prove to be an enduring method of interpretation. It provides up to this day a powerful and updatable archive of truth that has been updated again and again so as to respond to shocks in the asymmetrically organized architecture of genders and society. Thus it is a long shadow that the myth of the naturalness of the relation of the sexes has cast on all questions relating to the positioning of gender ranking in the social context. With the term sameness taboo, the US cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin (now legendary), back in the early days of feminist theory, interpreted this to mean that *men* and *women* must always be distinguished and may not on any account be perceived as identical.<sup>25</sup>

WHY IS IT NEVERTHELESS relevant in both analytical and political terms to grapple with changes? Because something has changed. In contrast to the historical precursors of anti-feminism, today's attacks are not expressed principally as general objections to feminism and the political notion of equality. The argument is not that women cannot have equal rights because they are inherently different, but that although women and men have equal rights, they are inherently and fundamentally different. Therefore, today people are mobilizing against an academic concept – gender – instead of feminism (and this can indeed be viewed as a historic breakthrough) and are rearticulating feminism in a specific way. This new feminism, which is being positioned to oppose gender, is essentially founded on naturalistic, familial, or religious – which usually means Christian – principles. And it claims that it is closer to healthy common sense, to the daily practice and experience of women and men than the denounced "gender ideology" of Birgit Kelle, Gabriele Kuby, and others,<sup>26</sup> which, according to the continuously fed phantasm, was conceived in Berkeley, implemented in Brussels, taught in German colleges and universities, and sets the rules. In addition, this specific articulation of feminism plays a not-insignificant role in the production of what with Stuart Hall we can call a workaday consciousness colored by racism – that knowledge with which people seek to validate their societal conditions and the boundaries that they draw, as well as the political and social battles in which they are placed, and which serves as a guideline for their actions.

According to Volker Zastrow, head of the politics section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the disastrous evocation of a dystopia of state-ordered egalitarianism indifferent to gender difference took the place of anti-feminist feelings of resentment and the questioning of universal equality (based on the law of nature). In 2006 he wrote that this contradicted the "feelings of most people, the religions, and scientific research" and that it was therefore legitimate to rebel against it:

**"And finally this brings us to the theoretical crux of the 'gender' concept. For it in no way means the existence of social gender roles and their characteristics: a banality that feminist classics such as Betty Friedan tied in to. Rather, ultimately 'gender' claims that there is no such thing as biological gender. It claims that the divi-**

sion of newborn babies into boys and girls is arbitrary; they could just as well be divided according to quite different viewpoints, such as big and small. Therefore there is an ultimately powerful assignment of identity right at the beginning of existence: the 'heterosexual matrix'. This rather philosophical hypothesis contradicts the most fundamental perception and feeling of most people, religions, and scientific research."<sup>27</sup>

The battle lines drawn up here by Zastrow became an established approach and can still be found in various contexts all across Europe today. For example, the Catholic Church in Poland claims to be developing a "new feminism" that takes a stand against the "dangerous gender nonsense," as Bożena Chohuj was able to demonstrate.<sup>28</sup> And here at home, for example, the "Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden" (Association of Evangelical Free Churches) is turning against discrimination against women, which they say represents "fertile ground for ideologies," and then immediately warning of the danger that comes from questioning the "natural" nature of the accepted gender difference and for which "gender ideology" is made responsible, as Barbara Thiessen has clearly shown.<sup>29</sup> A thoroughly surprising ecumenical movement is appearing here.

So to all appearances, wherever the offensive questioning of gender justice and equality do not seem to be politically opportune, where the perpetuation of gender inequality is increasingly dependent on context-specific conditions, and the "eternal difference" is no longer available routinely, without ado, as a resource for justifying inequality, the loudly proclaimed scientific emphasis of, as always, natural gender differences becomes, or is made, relevant. In order to gain control over the genuine erosion in gender relations, which ultimately also indicates the extent to which strong feminist movements have invaded our society's gender ranking and deep-rooted patriarchal structures, "scientific noise" is once again produced, the arsenal of biologically based truths is opened, and it is far less possible to deny the gender binary.

As Irene Dölling has shown, the production of many different interpretations of gender, which are constantly being updated, has always been among the cultural techniques that generate this everyday consciousness.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Dölling finds that the interlaced hegemonic gender and heteronormative family discourses of the modern age function particularly well for this purpose. For they represent a form of negotiation about society, about its self-concept, about the legitimization of in- and exclusion, and about inequalities, negotiation that directly addresses individuals and their immediate relationships. This is precisely where the neo-reactionary feminism of Birgit Kelle and Marine Le Pen, of Gabriele Kuby and Frauke Petry, ties in. The significant thing about their feminism is that unlike the historical precursors of anti-feminism it does not primarily present itself as a

general refutation of feminism and the idea of equality. Kelle and Kuby, Petry and Le Pen present themselves as feminists, not as anti-feminists, but indeed as the only ones who still defend the successes in the area of gender equality during the Enlightenment against the approaching Islamic Middle Ages. Therefore, as a rule, the argument is not that women cannot or should not be able to have equal rights because they are by nature different. Rather, it claims that women and men have equal rights and yet by nature are fundamentally, essentially, and clearly different ontologically. And, accordingly, it is precisely this ontologically authentic difference that feminism must take into consideration.

**IF IT IS ALSO TRUE**, when seen in this light, that the asymmetrically organized inverse structuring of male-universal and female-special, and also the everyday theorems of binary gender identity, determined the political, cultural, social, and symbolic architecture of modern societies right up to the present day, then it becomes clear what is at stake here, and to what extent. That the asymmetrically organized gender binary, just like the ubiquitous, heteronormatively framed family-based concepts of sociality, have recently come under the pressure of legitimization, as ultimately perhaps is demonstrated by the debates held all over the world on allowing lesbian and gay couples to marry. The notion that men and women "by their very nature" have different talents and that therefore various different paths should be open to them and different jobs available to them, that he is the man and she the woman, she belongs at the stove and he at the stock exchange, has in any case substantially lost plausibility. The effort that must be put into the division of the genders that supposedly lies in the "nature of things", a division that must be understood as normal, natural, and therefore inescapable, and that, as Bourdieu (2005) demonstrated, is present equally in objects, the social world, and bodies, and also functions as a systematic schema of perception, thinking, and acting – in short, what we can, with Edmund Husserl, describe as a "natural approach or doxic experience", is all the greater.

However, conversely that means nothing other than that feminist intervention has in fact adjusted the truth realm of gender, which for more than two hundred years, since the beginning of modern science, has been aligned with the naturalizing of gender. The fact that statements about gender can be considered to be scientifically "true" statements only insofar as they reside within the framework of a heteronormative dichotomy that is interpreted as natural, organized in a contradictory way, and founded on heteronormative principles, lays claim to its validity even into the present day life sciences, as feminist life-science research has shown. Regardless of this, feminist and gender-critical theory has succeeded in transforming *gender* into a critical tool, that is, in transforming it into a concept that does not make any statement about "what" sexual difference is but permits the articulation of hierarchies of power – and the questioning of them.

## Conclusion

Let us attempt a conclusion here. What I hope I have been able to demonstrate here is that gender is apt to upset and disrupt everyday certainties. This is proven by the violent, hate-filled attacks that Gender Studies has been subjected to for more than ten years now. But even more, I also wanted to demonstrate that *gender* is used by neo-reactionary forces to disturb and confuse and to orchestrate a new antagonism, a new us/them opposition – "the people 'against' the establishment". Therefore far more than the reputation of Gender Studies is at stake. For the attacks do not aim just to harm academics and their academic work, to discredit the interdisciplinary field of gender research and denounce it as unscientific. At stake is also the explicit discrediting of science and the university as a place where reality is questioned and negotiated unconditionally, as a part of an open, democratic society that can view things from many different perspectives. This open, democratic society is itself at stake.

Moreover – and this is my last point – anti-genderism is not only an element of an authoritarian, neo-reactionary disposition that aims to undermine constitutional, democratic principles (scientific freedom). Rather, gender here is being mobilized in a very specific way to justify racist or anti-Islamic policies of exclusion. All over Europe today we are witnessing xenophobic, nationalistic parties, but also neoliberal regimes, increasingly using concepts of equal rights to claim that male Muslim citizens – and non-Western male migrants in general – are not capable of respecting the rights of *women* and LGBTQI. This kind of mobilization by nationalistic and xenophobic parties, as well as by national-conservative regimes, of gender, sexuality, and a concept of female emancipation is certainly one of the most significant aspects for characterizing the current political situation. As I hope I have shown, in the objectives and rhetoric of neo-reactionary parties and movements, the battles against sexual diversity, and against the whole supposed "gender delusion", are closely connected with empty rhetoric and policies in favor of equal treatment that are clearly encoded as xenophobic and racist.

The question, however, is how we should react to these dynamics and policies in terms of both science and politics. Doubtless it is right not to enter into a discussion of veridiction, that is, to determine rules that regulate what is a true or false statement in relation to gender. But we should also not allow ourselves to become involved with the framework created in the minds of some members of the alliance, a framework of self-victimization and self-heroization, and we should refuse to operate within this sort of framework. Of this I am sure, that we as feminist academics must also dare to give self-critical answers to the political challenge of the neo-reactionary seizure of democracy. ■

Sabine Hark, professor of Gender Studies at Technische Universität Berlin.

## references

- 1 Simone de Beauvoir, *Das andere Geschlecht: Sitte und Sexus der Frau* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1992), first published in 1949, 334.

- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Emile Durkheim, *Die Regeln der soziologischen Methode* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984); first published in 1895.
- 4 De Beauvoir, *Das andere Geschlecht*, 335.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., 16.
- 8 Ibid., 898.
- 9 Ibid., 9
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Erving Goffman, "The Arrangement of the Sexes," *Theory and Society* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 301–31.
- 13 Ursula Müller, "Asymmetrische Geschlechterkultur in Organisationen und Frauenförderung als Prozess – mit Beispielen aus Betrieben und der Universität," *Zeitschrift für Personalforschung* 2 (1998): 123–42.
- 14 <http://www.gabriele-kuby.de>.
- 15 Goffman, "Arrangement of the Sexes," 303.
- 16 Ibid., 302
- 17 Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper & Row 1987), 7; first published in 1976.
- 18 Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia UP 1988), 42.
- 19 Ibid., 2.
- 20 Joan Scott, *Nach der Geschichte?*, in: Werkstatt Geschichte Nr. 17, 5–23, 18–19.
- 21 Pierre Bourdieu, *Die männliche Herrschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 144.
- 22 Hans Peter Klein, "Heldenhafte Spermien und wachgeküsst Eizellen," 2015; [www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/gender-studies-genderforschung-auch-in-der-biologie-13603216.html](http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/gender-studies-genderforschung-auch-in-der-biologie-13603216.html).
- 23 Peter Lattas, "Neue Spielweise für Feministinnen," *Junge Freiheit* 28 (2006); <http://www.jf-archiv.de/archiv06/200628070733.htm>.
- 24 Claudia Honegger, *Die Ordnung der Geschlechter: Die Wissenschaften vom Menschen und das Weib* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991).
- 25 Gayle Rubin, *Der Frauentausch: Zur politischen Ökonomie von Geschlecht, in Gender kontrovers: Genealogien und Grenzen einer Kategorie*, ed. Gabriele Dietze and Sabine Hark (Königstein: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2006), 69–115.
- 26 "The destabilization of the sex/gender order", according to Rogers Brubaker, was "threatening to the core agenda of the cultural right, which is centered on the defense of the family". Rogers Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 32.
- 27 Volker Zastrow, "Politische Geschlechtsumwandlung", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 20, 2006; <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/gender-mainstreaming-politische-geschlechtsumwandlung-1327841.html>.
- 28 Bożena Chohuj, "Gender-Idelogie – ein Schlüsselbegriff des polnischen Anti-Genderismus", in "*Anti-Genderismus? Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*", ed. Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa (Bielefeld: transkript, 2017), 219–37.
- 29 Barbara Thiessen, "Gender Trouble evangelisch: Marburger und Standortbestimmung", in Hark and Villa, "*Anti-Genderismus*", 149–68.
- 30 Irene Dölling, "'Eva-Prinzip'? Neuer Feminismus? Aktuelle Verschiebungen in Geschlechterleitbildern im Kontext gesellschaftlicher Umbruchsprozesse", in *Geschlecht Macht Arbeit: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven und politische Intervention*, ed. Marburger Gender-Kolleg (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2008), 24–41, 24.