One is not born, but rather becomes, woman." Simone de Beauvoir wrote this in her epochal work The Second Sex. 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". 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). "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"." 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. It is the whole of civilization 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." Certain differences between man and woman would "always exist" — this was her often repeated conviction. 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" that would justify writing a feminist book of this kind. Maybe "enough ink had flowed" already in the "debate on feminism". After all, it was not even clear whether "women even exist, " or perhaps, whether "every female person […] must of necessity be a woman". 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
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 ascertainment 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 confession and lends itself therefore more than enough reason to the mobilization of various provenance. Regardless, under the term that US sociologist Eving Goffman once coined, with critical intent, a term that has mutated into the contentious concept “genderism”, a notorious 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 spokespersons 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 “dispossession discourse”, to use an expression coined by the “soicity” and sex education to reproduce self-background 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 in Gender Studies.

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 – rights and the sexuality of ‘the genderer’ here is a concept of sociological critique. It is not”, Goffman explains, “the social consequences of innumerate 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 account would seem sound...” 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.”

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. “Gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences.” 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 social organization of human cohabitation can be derived. In this connection Scott strictly advocated rejecting the established and permanent quality of the binary opposition, a genuine historiography and the deconstruction of the constraints of gender difference, and ventured 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 gender agenda; major reductio ad absurdum 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.”

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.

**“THIS 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.”**

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 national, right-wing parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, the Freihetliche Partei Österreich (FPÖ) in Austria, the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) 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 strong connections with the current social movements in the racist, authoritarian, and anti-democratic, and authoritarian spectrum, for example, with the Identitäre or the Dresden based movement Pégida. 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 even some feminists, have been counted among its puritans.

What unites this alliance is first and foremost a common narrative — the founding principles of Western culture not only in Germany, but also in societies such as Italy and 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 even some feminists, have been counted among its puritans.

**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 the second wave, 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 Alliance 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 instance, see Alice Schwarzer and the feminist magazine Emma that she publishes. The discussion is about “gender madness” and “gender delusion”, and the force on its crude and dangerous ideology, which is out of touch with reality; how “gender women” are seeking the spotlight; the image of professors; and also the fact that Gender Studies ignores both scientifically proven and objective facts and “healthy human understanding”.

There are numerous deliberate reversals and contradictory 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 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 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 Henneger has shown in Die Ordnung der Geschlechter: Die Wissenschaft vom Menschen und das Weib, “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 we can become in terms of gender and what social conventions result from this is predeterined by nature. Scientifically transforming and naturalizing gender difference 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 same-sex, 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.

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 historical break-through) and articulating feminisms as 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. 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, which, according to the continuously fed phantom, 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 confusion 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 evacuation 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 religious, 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 could not do without. Rather, ultimately ‘gender’ claims that there is no such thing as biological gender. It claims that the divi-
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 Chołuj was able to demonstrate. 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 Thiesen has clearly shown. A thoroughly surprising ecumenical movement is appearing here. So to all appearances, whereas the offensive questioning of gender justice and equality do not seem to be politically oppos-

tion of newborn babies into boys and girls is arbitrary; the “heterosexual, have recently come under the pressure of legitimization, as a part of an open, democratic society that can view things from many different per-

discussion of science, has been aligned with the naturalizing of gen-

tional schema of perception, thinking, and acting – in short, what we can, with Edmund Husserl, describe as a “natural ap-

to deny the gender binary. For they represent a form of negotiation about society, about its self-concept, about the legitimization of in-


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 that 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-spe-

The question, however, is how should we react to these dy-

ogy, which are constantly being updated, has always been among the cultural techniques that generate this everyday consciousness. This is precisely where the neoreactionary feminism of Birgit Kelle and Gabriele Kuby and Frauke Petry, ties in. The significant thing about their feminism is that unlike the historical precur-

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