

I've got gender and I do not hesitate to use it¹

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1. Introduction

At present, gender and sexuality scholars are faced with an increasingly menacing wave of opposition. Such opposition takes hybrid forms: pressuring scholars to avoid presenting their critical research on matters deemed as “sensitive issues”; defunding research institutions, or even diverging funding from entire research fields; *in extremis*, attempting to disband the gender studies programs across the country altogether; actively persecuting and incarcerating scholars engaging in critical research; or threatening the scholars’ physical integrity. These ill-treatments are oftentimes reflective of the wider attempts at undermining democratic credentials in various national contexts. Recent developments across Europe indicate that the knowledge production of gender and sexuality scholars has become a prime target of the opponents to critical knowledge. This opposition to knowledge production is used as a means to coalesce support around various anxieties, which are connected to a fluid and less-than-certain future.

Set against this context, the workshop “Perilous Knowledge - Gender & Sexuality Scholars at Risk in Europe”² (June 4th 2018) held in Brussels may be seen as a first attempt to bring

¹ The Polish original slogan reading *Mam gender i nie zawaham się go użyć!* was printed prominently on a bus participating in the MANIFA 2017 feminist march in Warsaw, Poland (8 March 2017).

² <http://msh.ulb.ac.be/agenda/workshop-perilous-knowledge-gender-sexuality-scholars-at-risk-in-europewith/>

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together scholars, practitioners, and policy makers in order to share their experiences of such threatening mobilization, measure its “perilous” impact, and offer some critical reflections for the purpose of furthering the discussion, and exploring potential avenues of action. Held in a plenary format, the workshop was divided into two panel discussions. Each panel discussion was followed by a Questions & Answers session to provide the audience with an opportunity to engage and express their opinions on the issues presented. In between these panels, the institutional speeches were delivered by Yvon Englert (Chancellor of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, ULB) and Caroline Pauwels (Chancellor of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, VUB). The two chancellors stressed in their interventions that hosting the present workshop was part of the historical involvement of both universities in the struggle for gender equality, and their support for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) persons. Both chancellors emphasized in their speeches the imperious need for universities to join their efforts in order to offer a safe space for critical thinking and freedom of expression.

The first session of the day was titled “Organizing resistance—Gender & sexuality scholars constructing networks of solidarity”. It was moderated by Sébastien Chauvin (Université de Lausanne), and opened with presentations by Agnieszka Graff (University of Warsaw), Suvi Keskinen (University of Helsinki), Andrea Krizsan (Central European University) and Esra Ummak (Turkish scholar welcomed at the ULB). The speakers discussed the various forms that opposition against gender and sexuality knowledge production, in general, and gender and sexuality scholars, in particular, may take across Europe. They assessed the potential harm such opposition represents for the academia, at both individual and collective level, and identified various resistance strategies, tailored to the specific form of opposition encountered. The second panel titled “Defending perilous knowledge—Solidarity responses from professional organizations and political institutions” was moderated by Gily Coene

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(VUB), and consisted of interventions by Heidi Hautala (Vice-Chair of the European Parliament, Co-Chair of the European Parliamentary Working Group on Reproductive Health, HIV/AIDS and Development), Kathleen Van Brempt (Member of the European Parliament, Committee on Industry, Research and Energy), Viviane Mazzichi (Former administrator of the European Commission, DG Research and Innovation), Halliki Voolma (Policy Officer, Gender Equality Unit, DG Justice, European Commission), Jan Willem Duyvendak (Chair, Council for European Studies; Director, Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences), and Sara de Jong (Co-Chair, AtGender). The speakers presented the EU institutional mechanisms, which programmatically support the area of gender equality action, and explored both the political and academic institutional frameworks, which may help gender and sexuality scholars mitigate these threats. The workshop was concluded by the speeches of Akwugo Emejulu (University of Warwick), José Ignacio Pichardo Galan (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), and Mieke Verloo (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen). Last but not least, the volume “Varieties of Opposition to Gender Equality in Europe”, edited by Mieke Verloo for the Routledge Gender and Comparative Politics Series, was launched. The volume examines the potential and challenges of our current scholarship on understanding opposition to gender equality in Europe, and provides significant theoretical contributions, which shed light onto the conceptual complexities discussed during the workshop.

The purpose of the present conference report is not necessarily to offer verbatim presentations of each intervention of the speakers, or of the ensuing discussions with the audience; rather, our intention is to highlight the most recurrent and relevant standpoints. In so doing, we have organized these discussions thematically into 1) the conceptualization of hybrid and contingent opposition to gender and sexuality scholars; 2) the perception of

critical knowledge/education as dangerous; and 3) the knowing subject/intersectional subjectivities. Notwithstanding this, we need to emphasize that such a thematic structuring by no means entails a rigid compartmentalization of the contributions and their key standpoints; rather, several of these themes were weaved into these contributions concomitantly.

2. Key themes

2.1. Conceptualizing hybrid and contingent opposition

The most recurring theme of the workshop pertained the difficulty to conceptualize the ongoing situation. Several different cases of attacks against gender and sexuality scholars across Europe were presented by various speakers. These attacks may take multiple forms: defunding research institutions, or even diverging funding from entire research fields (such as in Bulgaria³, Poland, and Hungary⁴); blacklisting of gender and sexuality scholars (such as in Sweden, and Hungary); attempting to disband the gender studies programs across the country altogether (such as in Hungary⁵); actively persecuting and incarcerating queer scholars engaged in critical research (as in Turkey⁶); attempts at censoring research with an LGBTQI perspective on migration and asylum matters within universities (as in Italy⁷); or threatening the integrity of critical scholars by means of new information and communication technologies as tools to harass and intimidate (as in Finland). The inventory of these attacks

³ <http://dversia.net/3893/statement-bas-project-gender-equality/>

⁴ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/gender-studies-under-attack-from-new-right>

⁵ <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/08/13/proposal-ban-gender-studies-hungary>

⁶ <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/639>

⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/academic-signatories/academic-freedom-under-threat-workshop-on-lgbt-asylum-is-cen>

indicates that an increasing number of gender and sexuality scholars face mounting challenges of academic freedom and personal safety over multiple levels: individual, family, community, institutional, and not least societal. These attacks raise numerous issues: the practice of scientific inquiry; academic institutions are more often than not unaware of the risks involved, and that researchers are generally poorly equipped to face them. To convey the complexity of these attacks, we chose henceforth to describe it as “*oppositional retrogressive mobilization*”.

Despite some national specificities, this oppositional retrogressive mobilization generally consists of a similar type of actors. More established as well as newly founded conservative actors seem to have identified a means to reach beyond their traditional constituencies. References to being “anti-gender” seem to be the “symbolic glue” (Kováts and Põim, 2015) that enable crafting such coalitions around a commonly identified threat, namely the knowledge production of gender and sexuality scholarship. Indeed, gender and sexuality knowledge production is perceived as the ideological matrix (Bracke and Paternotte, 2016; Graff, 2016; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017) of a set of progressive ethical and social reforms: gender mainstreaming of policies; sexual and reproductive rights for women, and rights for LGBTQI persons; the protection of women against violence in the framework of the Istanbul Convention; growing visibility and acceptance of gender and sexuality studies at universities; and the implementation of gender-sensitive education in schools and kindergartens.

Nonetheless, this oppositional retrogressive movement has a variable membership. In several countries, anti-gender actors overlap or cooperate with those promoting right-wing populist politics. Together they initiate activities that are based on a shared sense of entitlement and provides reciprocal political recognition. Therefore, the relationship between anti-gender and

right-wing populism cannot be overlooked and requires awareness about their shared political strategies. A case in point, in the Polish context the anti-gender mobilization exploits the current political regime, which reaches beyond civil society organization. More clearly, the alliances between conservative Catholic clergy, anti-choice organizations, and right-wing extremist actors have blossomed in the context of the dramatic right-wing populist inroads in mainstream politics. In the 2015 Presidential and Parliamentary elections, the right-wing populist Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) registered a crushing victory. Their candidate won the presidential race, and later the same year, the party won a plurality of the votes and formed the government. These retrogressive forces have found a common rhetorical matrix centered on the imperatives to defend traditional Polish family values, and to protect Polish children from gender ideology. The idea of a residual antisemitism as part of this mobilization was also presented, though it does not seem to be immediately relevant for the specific modes of mobilization elsewhere in Europe.

Notwithstanding this, during the workshop several participants emphasized at various times that this oppositional retrogressive mobilization cannot be simply equated with right-wing populism. One needs to be careful when conceptualizing it. Indeed, the mobilization of anti-gender campaigns in Europe should not be conflated with right-wing populism. On this matter, certain feminist goals and strategies have been partially recuperated and selectively incorporated to legitimate neoliberal capitalism (Fraser, 2013). Sometimes, this selective cooptation has been employed to prop anti-gender discourses (Verloo, 2018). To begin with, gender equality is sometimes used instrumentally to pursue a political agenda that opposes the model of state feminism developed in Northern Europe to non-Western migrants and Muslims, who are then portrayed as threats to women's rights (see, Keskinen, 2013; Norocel, 2017; Norocel et al. 2018); alternatively, LGBTQI rights are coopted and subordinated a

nationalist agenda, a phenomenon conceptualized as homonationalism (Puar, 2007), whereby the rights of the “native LGBTQI population” are allegedly endangered by Islam, which is placed on an irreconcilable opposition to Western Enlightenment-inspired values.

Homonationalism was illustrated by vivid discussions concerning such cases as the Netherlands, as well as Belgium. Besides, there are some left leaning groups sometimes surprisingly supporting anti-gender discourses, such as several influential Italian feminists and Marxists (Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2017).

With this in mind, the oppositional mobilization has different retrogressive endeavors, which do not entirely fit one single narrative, yet most often are generically presented as “conservative politics”. The “conservative political agenda” is a hybrid construct, which juxtaposes disparate and at times contradictory conservative streams, and it is heavily contingent in how conservative values and traditions are selectively remembered and interpreted. The workshop speakers agreed that there is a pressing need for more sophisticated concepts, which may enable scholars to examine the transnational and growingly global intricacies of this construct. In addition, they emphasized that there is a need for comparative research to unpack its complex dynamics, and multiple locations. This notwithstanding, it was acknowledged that sketching out a wider picture of the phenomenon is incredibly complex, not least because the anti-gender mobilization varies along several dimensions: discourses; geographical spread across polities; religious authorities and internal power architecture; and last but not least, political power and impact.

Consequently, different versions of gender equality are opposed (Verloo, 2018), which in turn gives rise to varying retrogressive mechanisms. On this matter, there was some disagreement at the workshop concerning the proportion of this mobilization, and the idea of

an anti-gender backlash in general terms. Contingency, fluctuation, and non-linear development seemed to be the key elements of anti-gender mobilization (cf. Bracke and Paternotte, 2016; Bellé and Poggio, 2018; Graff, 2016; Kováts and Põim, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Some panelists emphasized that anti-gender backlashes cannot be denied, but these enjoy rather limited support, and occur against a backdrop of significant historical achievements. Illustratively, a central question addressed to the speakers in the first panel was: “Is this happening because we are winning, or is this because we are losing?”

The answers to this question were in some cases rather pessimistic, based on the personal and local experiences of the panelists. “The battle is already lost, and there is an ongoing crisis of liberal democracy” was one bleak comment; others were more optimistic arguing that, overall, there has been a general improvement for women’s and LGBTQI-rights across the board, though acknowledged the worrying developments that were pointed out earlier. Besides, this retrogressive mobilization is in most cases a marginal presence, and there is little indication that these are orchestrated centrally, or manifest of some global conspiracy. Notwithstanding this, there was a certain agreement that this multifaced retrogressive mobilization thrives in those contexts in which the democratic climate is declining.

Most often than not, however, it faces a vigorous progressive countermobilization across most European polities (see also, Verloo, 2018). In addition, as it was pointed out by several EU representatives from both the European Parliament and the European Commission, the relative overactivity of retrogressive mobilization may be a sign of an institutional entrenchment of gender and sexuality knowledge production. The topical examples concerned the push for gender equality and advancing LGBTQI-rights in the framework of EU-wide legislation, or through international treaties; increased awareness about the gender

gap in EU-funded research, and the importance of acknowledging the significance of gender and sexuality scholarship in knowledge production. In part because of this, the EU political representatives and its institutional architecture have become a prime target of anti-gender discourses, by means of a complex mix of Euroscepticism, conservatism, and right-wing populism, whereby the EU (or “Brussels” as it is derisively labelled) is portrayed as a detached and corrupt elite that conspires to amputate national sovereignty and impose deviancy onto ordinary people (see, Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

Notwithstanding this, the EU political representatives and its institutional architecture came under heavy criticism from several invited speakers. They pointed out that EU harbors and enhances discriminatory practices particularly with regard to extraterritorial border control, and other similar border policing endeavors, such as the controversial EU-Turkey agreement concerning so-called “irregular migrants”, aimed at preventing refugees to enter the EU⁸. Consequently, they warned that they are increasingly disillusioned and doubtful of the EU’s willingness and ability to protect them; in turn, they called for critical thinking beyond existing EU power structures, which they held responsible for transforming the EU external border into a means of division and separateness.

⁸ Turkey agreed that all migrants described as “not in need of international protection” intercepted in Turkish waters on their way to Greece be returned to Turkey. Additionally, a 1:1 system was established. For each Syrian readmitted to Turkey from Greece, another Syrian would be resettled in the EU. In return, the EU speeded up the visa liberalization deadline for Turkish citizens, and reallocated an additional three billion € in funding up to the end of 2018 (Batalla Adam 2017, pp. 45-46).

2.2. Critical knowledge/education as dangerous

Another core theme evidenced at the workshop was the moral panic instigated by the retrogressive mobilization of the anti-gender movement. One aspect of this moral panic is the imperative to protect children from being exposed to gender and sexuality knowledge. Such a focus on children is articulated along two directions. A first direction identified by several speakers is that of presenting gender and sexuality studies as dangerous to the wellbeing and proper development of children (cf. Bracke and Paternotte, 2016; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). Indeed, many of the activities concerning opposition to “gender theory” and the danger it posits to the “traditional family” target lower-grade schools, and the educational process therein. In this context, universities play a key role in the alleged ideological formation of (sex) educators, who are deemed dangerous for exposing children too early to “harmful” information. On this matter, Poland stands out as a striking example of parental mobilization against “gender education”, which is deemed detrimental to the proper development of children. These “spontaneous” instances of parents’ activism, in fact carefully orchestrated and choreographed by conservative organizations with the support of the Catholic church, are part of a wider critique of the “sexual permissiveness”, seen as a legacy of May ’68, wherein “gender ideology” is accused of encouraging children’s hypersexualization, as well as pedophilia (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). The dangers to children that gender and sexuality studies allegedly represents, may take more violent forms as well, such as the state-endorsed attacks against LGBTQI scholars in Turkey who were publicly accused of attempting to “pervert children’s minds”. A case in point, the efforts to institutionalize responses to tackle homophobia in schools based on a study (Ummak and Bilgin, 2017), which evidenced that LGBTQI pupils in Turkish schools were more exposed than their heterosexual peers to developing psychological problems, resorting to alcohol and tobacco abuse, and committing suicide, were publicly dismissed as a push for “gender

education”. Consequently, the school management and teachers generally remain silent, unresponsive, and even complicit towards the institutional indifference to addressing homophobia in schools.

A second direction that emphasizes the importance of children is coalesced around imperatives to “reproduce the nation” and reinforce the “natural order” (mapped out in the report “Restoring the natural order: The religious extremists’ vision to mobilize European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction”⁹). Such reasoning combines accusations that gender and sexuality knowledge production leads to a weakening of the national ethos, and various Islamophobic tropes, thus arguing that the “wrong kind of nation” is being reproduced. Reproductive rights and bodily autonomy are depicted as demographic threats, whereby the traditional family that constitutes the national unit is replaced by undesired family constellations and/or racialized families. This form of conservatism is fueling misogyny and racism under the guise of promoting traditional values and protecting the “natural order of things”. The state-sanctioned educational system is described as a “Marxist plot” to indoctrinate children, thus the conservative push for various homeschooling formula. By the same measure, the efforts to promote gender equality and support women’s autonomy both within and outside the family are dismissed as “radical feminist lobby”: The preferred alternative is returning to a single breadwinner model whereby women rediscover their femininity as devoted wives and caring mothers for their husbands and children.

⁹ https://www.epfweb.org/sites/epfweb.org/files/rtno_epf_book_lores.pdf

2.3. The knowing subject/intersectional subjectivities

The third theme concerns the reinterpretation (and even cooptation) of perilous knowledge, and the complexity of the knowing subject. It was pointed out at the workshop that the anti-gender campaigns focus extensively on post-structuralist scholarship, particularly on the work of Judith Butler (1990; 1993; 1995; 2004). Butler is considered to be the “mother of gender ideology”. In this context, gender and sexuality knowledge production is simplistically deemed ideological by means of summary oversimplification and epistemological primitivism. Part of this retrogressive mobilization is the push for an alternative field of knowledge production, attempting to establish anti-gender discourses as legitimate in the academia, organizing conferences on their preferred themes, and inviting loyal figures to give public lectures in academic environments. The examples discussed at the workshop concerned the dramatic developments in the Russian Federation, where the regime subordinated the knowledge production to fulfil its political agenda. Another development pertains the establishment of the Institute of Economic and Political Social Sciences (ISSEP) in Lyon, envisaged by Marion Maréchal-Le Pen to be an academic environment for the French “conservative youth”.

At the same time, several workshop speakers and participants questioned whose claims to be a knowing subject in the process of gender and sexuality knowledge production are deemed legitimate. They appealed to greater reflexivity among gender and sexuality scholars, and encouraged to interrogate systems of privilege that researchers themselves may enjoy. In particular, one of the workshop’s conclusions was a compelling argument for greater awareness about the role racial politics play in the present neoliberal context and criticized those sections of the progressive camp that assist the conservative right in their backlash against multiculturalism and support the renewed push for assimilation (see, Bassel and

Emejulu, 2017). On this matter, the ability of black feminist scholarship to envision radical futures was evidenced, and especially the role of an intersectional perspective was emphasized. The intersectional perspective enables a better understanding of how the retrogressive mobilization is underpinned by intricate connections between heteronormative conceptions of the traditional family unit, and thinly disguised racialized hierarchies that focus on preserving “European culture”. One needs to be nonetheless aware that these are differently articulated in each political context across Europe, such as the blend between femonationalism and welfare chauvinist appeals (Keskinen, 2013; Norocel et al, 2018), or the mix of homonationalism and racialized hierarchies in countries like Belgium, or the Netherlands (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). The challenge for gender and sexuality researchers is in this respect to be able to contribute with critical analyses of the various and mutually shaping systems of difference and inequality, and concomitantly be aware of their own position of privilege.

3. Conclusion

An intensive and generous exchange of ideas such as this workshop is rather difficult to distill in a few concluding thoughts. The most important conclusion is that the retrogressive mobilization is far from being an isolated national phenomenon; rather, it has a hybrid and context contingent architecture that reunites diverse national actors (such as the state apparatus of illiberal and authoritarian regimes; extreme right organizations; right-wing populist parties), and transnational actors (such as the Catholic church; anti-choice pan-European umbrella organizations). In this context, is difficult to assess the impact of this retrogressive mobilization, and foresee the potential risks it may posit. Too narrow a focus on a specific national context may be misleading. Put simply, fluctuation, contingency, and non-

linear development are the defining aspects of the retrogressive mobilizations across Europe. Consequently, gender and sexuality scholars cannot limit themselves to punctual and spontaneous reactions to the various attacks they are subjected to; rather, they imperiously need to organize and deliberate on a long-term strategy to address this challenge.

With this in mind, there is a pressing need to gather specialist knowledge and deepen our understanding concerning these retrogressive mobilizations, and their apparent increasing appeal across Europe. This calls for analyzing this phenomenon systematically from a diversity of research perspectives (anthropology, sociology, political science, as well as ethics). At the same time, gender and sexuality scholars need to be ensured their academic freedom, and enjoy the committed support of their home institutions. Notwithstanding this, they must be aware of the programmatic push by various sections of this retrogressive mobilization to coopt, subordinate, or reinterpret critical knowledge to suit the conservative agenda. To counter this, gender and sexuality scholars need to build alliances with the grassroots movements of communities that historically have been subject to oppression and systemic silencing, such as racialized minorities and the LGBTQI-community. Interactions with this progressive activism may help drafting a common toolkit of strategies to be used to mitigate and overcome the retrogressive mobilizations.

Gender and sexuality scholars could use the academic resources and the privileged position they enjoy for creating transnational networks and platforms of solidarity, which are open for dialogue and critical participation in matters of wider social interest. Such mobilization may take various forms. Universities across Europe could explore new ways to collaborate for advancing, promoting, and defending gender and sexuality knowledge production. There are two ways of action. First, this could be pursued both within the academia (such as mapping

out and documenting the retrogressive mobilization; offering a safe haven for persecuted scholars; and providing funding for scholars in the field in a precarious situation). Second, this could be developed in close interaction with the wider society (such as the salutary stance against homophobia and transphobia that ULB and VUB took by participating together in the 2018 Belgian Pride, which was echoed by demands to emulate it elsewhere in Europe).

Most importantly, as both organizers, invited speakers, and the audience constantly emphasized, this workshop should not be regarded as a one-shot event; rather, it represents a starting point for a programmatic mobilization of gender and sexuality scholars. The aim of such mobilization ought to be the pursuit of perilous knowledge production, and solidarity responses to the retrogressive mobilization against it. It is time to prove ourselves and those mobilizing against us that we do indeed got gender (and sexuality knowledge), and we do not hesitate to use our knowledge to conquer over bigoted ignorance¹⁰!

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¹⁰ The Latin motto *Scientia vincere tenebras* is shared by both the ULB and VUB, reflecting their common history in the pursuit of academic freedom independent from political or religious authority.

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