

Truth Be Told, Science Be Bold. The Growing Fear of ‘Queer’

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Abstract

The flak which Gender Studies receive from within academic institutions, in (social) media and even through bans from state governments is usually staged as a crucial redeeming of science as a ‘neutral’, ‘distant’ and ‘objective’ endeavour. As a term ‘gender’ meanwhile has become synonymous with politics, activism and ideology regardless of the context or the shape in which it is served. Queer interrogations of the heteronormative ordering of sex, gender and sexuality in particular are rendered as scientifically untenable and socially disruptive fantasy texts. This contribution investigates the modes and means of maintaining and (re-)gaining discursive power regarding the delimitations of the contestable and underscores the necessity, value, and force of queer knowledge productions.

1 Surely in the course of the current COVID-19 pandemic a large number of scientists in Germany have gained public attention and have been allowed to give insights not only into their own individual research and estimations of the current situation and its development but also into the dynamic endeavor of science as such. Many people have reacted impatiently, even aggressively, because many facts have been and continue to be debated, discarded and updated in the context of the manifold findings, approaches and perspectives necessarily considered in order to figure out the best way of countering the spread and impact of COVID-19. Obviously, the analysis of the pandemic and of its impact cannot be limited to the lens of medical needs and expertise. Rather the pandemic underscores the value and importance of a continued dialogue between scientific, socio-cultural, political, economic, ecologic and ethical perspectives. It also underscores the fundamental situatedness and entanglement of the sciences within this scope, thus challenging a - particularly German? - idea of science as objective, distant, neutral, definite and indisputable. That even the ‘natural sciences’ do not provide instant and globally unanimous knowledge and immediate solutions, but rather are entangled in contradictory discourses, still seems frightening to many people. In her article “Situated Knowledges” (1988) Donna Haraway has already identified the attempt at or ideal of ‘objectivity’ within the natural sciences as their decisive flaw:

“Our” problem, is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness. (Haraway 579)

In this light, can a much-needed reevaluation of the concept of science lead to a public reappraisal of gender studies? Of an academic field that has been and continues to be the target

of media and public scorn for allegedly disguising minority politics as scientific endeavor practiced by an elitist and radical political group subverting the notion of science, a re-education program polluting academia? Will such a reappraisal foreground that conscientious science does not pose as absolute, authoritative, all-knowing and thus provide reassuringly comforting closure, but rather continues to ask questions, challenging the seemingly known by generating new approaches and evidence, and thus remains critical, unsettled, developing? Will the current situation help us to see that science is always engaged, involved, dependent, self-questioning and open to debate? The debates relating to the pandemic bring into focus that scientific detachment from human interests and needs and socio-cultural positionings would even be irresponsible and that “questions of gender, race, coloniality, [class] and indigeneity are not optional variables or analytics that each field can choose whether to consider” (Subramaniam 422; my addition).

2 The concept of science as probing its object of study from a ‘safe distance’ becomes particularly problematic with regard to gender studies, an academic field continuously scrutinized and accompanied by media attention, public surveillance and suspicion therefore blurring clear-cut boundaries of investigator/investigated. The flak which gender studies receive from within the academic institutions ‘and’ from the public often seems to be grounded in a prevailing - while also contested - demand for a ‘scientific approach’ that is supposedly ‘neutral’, ‘distant’ and ‘objective’. In the context of such an ‘ideal scenario’ the scientist is pictured as being personally detached from the respective object of analysis, thus allegedly enabling a ‘clear unprejudiced view’. An established notion of theoretical distance is upheld as a guiding principle of and aim for proper and valid research. However, with regards to gender studies another paradox relating to the upheld idea of ‘safe distance and scientific objectivity’ becomes evident, because it is precisely a considerable part of gender and queer theory which is accused of being too abstract, too theoretical, too elitist, hardly comprehensible. The alleged distance here is thus viewed as a fault concerning its object of analysis, suspected of attempting to ‘appear scientific’ on the surface while ‘actually’ being deeply anchored in ideology. ‘Gender’, it seems, signals identity politics, activism, ideology regardless of the context or the shape in which it is served. Either considered as too complex and abstract or as too self-interested and delusional, gender studies seemingly have to be kept in check, separated from ‘serious’ knowledge production and transfer, and thus from ‘pure, disinterested science’.

3 But then again, have the public attacks on and governmental attempts to ban gender studies – in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Brazil to name the most evident cases - actually been triggered by the debate over what is ‘proper science’, or are they rather a result of attempts

to define and police what is ‘proper sex(uality)’? Is this generalizing critique of gender studies as a politically driven - and thus ‘impure’ - academic field a stand-in for the panic caused by the rather fundamental challenges posed by it? After all, many gender and queer theories question a social order naturalized and essentialized in the service of national, white, heteronormative and patriarchal interests. The amount of media and public attention and scorn, and even of governmental reactions and bans can hardly be sufficiently explained with reference to a sudden interest of the general public in defining the conceptualization and methodologies of science. However, questions of gender, sex and sexualities always tend to provoke interest, to appeal or appall, unsettle or appease, as they concern what we are accustomed to and consider our most personal, most intimate selves, pertaining to our ‘inner truths’, the fundamental core of our human existence. As a governing organizing principle within Western, heteronormative societies ‘sex’ positions us profoundly in formations, interrelations and interconnected practices. It is not surprising then that there is probably no other academic field that – in recent years at least in Germany and Eastern European countries¹ - has generated as much public attention, scrutiny and criticism, which is rather disproportionate to the ‘actual’ marginal status of gender studies at universities and within the scope of academic work in general.

4 Much of cultural and social studies are skeptical of the notion and possibility of scientific objectivity and distance, but acknowledge science as inevitably situated knowledge which can never be completely detached from but rather is always entangled with and informed by sociocultural conditions and interests. This stance may hold true even more so for a large part of gender and queer studies research. Originating in and from feminist interventions starting in the 1970s, challenging the university as a ‘patriarchal’, Western Eurocentric and heteronormative institution, gender studies have foregrounded the interconnectedness of social movements and research, the intertwining of theory and praxis, of science and politics, of knowledge and ideologies from the start as unavoidable - but by the same token - alterable conditions of academia as an institution of knowledge production. The important connection of

¹ It has become very difficult to keep track with an evident political nervousness relating to (anti-)queer-feminist and (anti-)gender studies efforts in these countries. While writing this contribution, a new abortion law in Poland was announced by the government (but delayed because of the mass protests) practically prohibiting abortion (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/27/world/europe/poland-abortion-ruling-protests.html>), adoption became prohibited in Hungary for “same sex couples” (<https://www.dw.com/en/lgbt-rights-hungary-passes-law-banning-same-sex-adoption/a-55947139>), the German right wing party AfD on Dec 17th once again brought up the issue of gender studies as “ideology not science” as an agenda item in parliament (<https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2020/kw51-de-gender-forschung-812898>), and but on Dec 16th, the Romanian constitutional court rejected a suggested banning “the teaching of on gender” (https://internationalledugenre.net/news-on-romania/victory-in-romania-the-constitutional-court-rejects-the-amendment-banning-the-teaching-of-gender/?fbclid=IwAR3RUhj-4hIj_ER6FCmPgkaenAhgcvQqPuDye_xM1IEu7ToMRbLFYAY5Yk).

research and responsibility, or rather, of research ‘as’ responsibility remains a shared stance for many, although there are obviously ongoing disputes within gender and queer studies concerning conflicting notions of what may signify as valuable research and important work. What might be at stake is a necessary redefinition of ‘science’ as such. Surely science needs to be distinguished from ‘opinion, gut-feeling, post-truth, fake news, conspiracy theory etc.’, particularly in the context of the current pandemic. But the separation of (natural) sciences and humanities for example continues to suggest that there are scientific areas more neutral and purer, while others entangled, engaged, and political. Gender and queer studies scholars agree to a notion of the inseparability of scientific research and social practice and of socio-political and economic interests and an ethics based precisely on this interconnectedness. Thus, rather than thinking of scientific approaches as oriented ‘towards’ social practices, gender studies continue to show the importance of thinking in terms of ‘situated knowledges’ and rather uphold and maintain a notion of science ‘as’ social practice and engagement.

5 This inseparability can be underscored with reference to the recent juridical, medical, and conceptual ‘adjustments’ and acknowledgements in terms of ‘same sex marriage’, trans*- and inter* rights and visibilities, but also with regard to the evident backlash they face.² The subject of marriage equality had been a long-time concern in ‘gay and lesbian activism’ since the 1980s and has since led to many countries granting same sex couples at least more rights and privileges entailed with marriage, ‘registered partnership’ or ‘pax’. The extension of lesbian, gay and bisexual concerns to a required acknowledgement and just treatment of trans*-, inter*-, non-binary and genderqueer-lives is probably the latest most evident interlocking of scientific discourses and social practices. Denaturalising gender dichotomy is both an academic as well as a socio-cultural undertaking. Many applaud the extended inclusiveness that new laws and identity expansions can bring about for those that for a long time have been demanding rights that for others seemed self-evident and ‘natural’. The focus of both social activism and gender and queer theories on ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’ as discursively naturalized and essentialised constructions serving white heterosexual and patriarchal privileges and the critique of androcentric heteronormativity as its naturalized and regulating force are, however, also met with vigorous denunciations. They are widely and forcefully articulated in social networks and the media in the shape of ridiculing, shaming and, most alarmingly, threats of rape and murder in predominantly anonymous writings. Scholars are accused of contributing to the ‘perversion’ and ‘degeneration’ of the ‘objectivity and purity’ of the sciences, and thus ultimately of the

² It is obviously impossible here to do justice to the respective national/regional alterations in terms of status and rights as responses to queer interventions. You can find a report on “Social Acceptance of LGBT People in 174 Countries, 1981 to 2017” here: <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/global-acceptance-index-lgbt/>

‘natural order’ as the foundation of human sociality and irrevocable essence of our individual existence as such. It seems that within a society that takes heteronormativity not only for granted but views it as its essential foundation, gender and queer studies which lay bare its constructedness and contest the dichotomies and binaries on which it rests must appear as threatening to that order and ultimately as a debasing endeavor.

6 Gender and queer studies have supported and participated in a decisive conceptual shift regarding questions of gender equality and gender multiplicity. The redefinition of ‘marriage’ by including same sex couples, the German law’s implementation of “the third option” as a possible entry in one’s personal documents (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes), or the World Health Organisation’s removal of trans* from the classification of mental disorders in 2019³ concern theoretical, discursive, performative and social rearrangements (“Transgender no longer recognised as 'disorder' by WHO”). From theoretical and activist points of view all these changes may be regarded as success stories since they testify to a growing recognition of until recent times predominantly ignored social ‘outcasts’. They also testify to the importance and strength of interdisciplinary and inclusive dialogues beyond academic institutions. Bringing allegedly minority concerns to mainstream attention has the potential of opening up restricted views on gendered and sexual lives in general. It may assist in bringing to the fore how all of us are involved in and affected by the making and breaking of gender stereotypes, hierarchies, and limitations.

7 In 2018, on June 3rd, in a ceremony marking the persecution of ‘gays’ by the Hitler regime, German president Walter Steinmeier acknowledged that the marginalizing, pathologizing and criminalizing treatment of same sex desire continued long after the war and in both parts of a then-divided country. In Western Germany male homosexual acts were only decriminalized in 1969 after over 50.000 men had been sentenced to prison and more than 100.000 investigated under the paragraph §175. In both parts of the country male homosexual acts until 1968 were regarded and treated as ‘fornication’ and in Eastern Germany tolerated only among adults over 21 years of age. Moreover, homosexuality was removed from the worldwide list of diseases only in 1991, and its long history of criminalization and pathologization continues to haunt same sex desire in this country. In his speech Walter Steinmeier asked for forgiveness for the caused suffering and injustice, and for the missing apology, memorial or reparations by the governments that followed. He reassured “all gays, lesbians and bisexuals, all queers, trans- and intersexuals” that they are protected in today's Germany (qtd. in Roßmann). It is noteworthy that the main question here appears to be the need

³ Unfortunately, intersex* still remains on the list of so-called ‘dysfunctions’.

of ‘protection’ and not ‘equality’ along with a general fight against ‘anti-lgbtia*’- violence. According to the speech the group in need of and seeking ‘protection’ is not only ‘homosexuals’ but apparently also other ‘identities’ challenging heteronormative conceptions of gender and sexuality.

8 Of course, Steinmeier’s speech and apology can be viewed as an achievement of continued activism, of a political, juridical, and scientific reconceptualization of queer lives and a progressive step towards acknowledging these lives as equal. However, Steinmeier’s words also articulate a very heteronormative and ‘paternalistic’ gesture that clearly separate the needy from the strong, the minority from the norm, the natural from the deviant and so on. Making allowances to LGBTI concerns ‘as’ LGBTI concerns in this manner may rather work towards solidifying heteronormative orderings and power structures than towards understanding gender and sexual diversity to be a general concern. Accordingly, as activists and scholars alike, our responsibility in theory and practice is to make sure that those developments feed into the debates on gender and sexual equalities, opening up new possibilities, rather than closing them down by marking them as ‘minority’ concerns. After all, does not ‘the majority’ – as a discursively invoked and naturalised rather than clearly identifiable and stable group – also benefit from more possibilities regarding gender conceptions, performances, and arrangements?

9 As an apparently given and customary concept of identity heterosexuality discursively is the sexuality that needs not speak its name. In a social rather than individual setting, performing or passing as heterosexual and ‘cis’ as the ‘norm’ even coats sexuality, at least the threatening and confusing potentials of gender and sexual fluidity. By accepting heterosexuality and ‘cis’ to be ‘the norm’ both the social activist and the theoretical focus of the debate usually turn to those ‘identities’ that – conceived of and accepted ‘as’ deviancies - are subsumed under the ever-expanding LGBTIQA*- Banner. This ‘rainbow banner’ tellingly comprises both gendered and sexual deviations from the established norm and therewith fulfills a twofold purpose in the service of heteronormativity. Their naming and alignment make those assembled by it seemingly definable and classifiable, suggesting an acknowledgement of and a space granted for ‘those others’, identified as or identifying with LGBTIQA*. By the same token the grouping of LGBTIQA* is a continuous adding and outing of ‘other others’ leaving heteronormativity fundamentally unchallenged and solid. The rainbow flag collects and connects those ‘identities’ whose potential to put heteronormativity in question needs to be kept under control and in check by their naming, categorical ordering and a continued performative disentanglement of the norm from the queer. As a label of social identity, heteronormativity by contrast tends to deflect sexuality as

an object of great suspicion; the general and disquieting meaning that pervades our conduct and our existence, in spite of ourselves; the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us; the fragment of darkness that we each carry within us: a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends. (Foucault 69)

Heteronormativity thus functions to pacify and sanctify “the evil portents” and the “fragment of darkness” of sexuality (69). LGBTIQ concerns on the contrary seem to raise the question of sexuality explicitly either because they differ in terms of a commonly presumed gender constellation regarding their sexuality or because their gender identity is challenging biologist assumptions of the ‘two sex model’. This is the reason why an alleged sexualisation and confusion of ‘innocent children’ is thought to be brought about by those thematisations of LGBTIQ* concerns that meanwhile have entered the curricula at some schools in Germany, and which testify to the success and thus perceived threat of gender and queer studies interventions.⁴

10 Although there surely are many possible arrangements of desire and sexual practices that signify *as* heterosexual, the ‘boy meets girl’ formula seemingly needs no explanation, no theory, no justification. Heterosexuality signifying as the governing norm of sex is not in need of and responsible for generating and securing its always already given social acceptance. In fact, heterosexuality’s artificial classification, the discursive straightening of its complexity and diversity is a comforting shield from scientific scrutiny, examination and (queer) theory. Gender dichotomy and heterosexuality perform as both the ‘normal’ destinations as well as the narrative closures of identity. Heterosexuality, by means of a continued invocation of its natural grounding, as a ‘biological fact’, as a given, standard and stable identity, overwrites the means of its critical interrogation, transferring scientific and critical research to the ‘queer’, the deviant, the ‘questionable and pathologisable’ bodies. Hegemonic heteronormativity is built upon a paradoxical but necessary enterprise of on the one hand discursively upholding seemingly ‘naturally’ and ‘biologically given’ ‘essential’ differences between the two sexes while continuously needing to articulate, perform and defend them as natural. Heterosexuality needs to disguise its own discursive mode of production to maintain its status as solid, natural, and thus incontestable norm. The recent attacks on gender studies scholars and on gender and queer studies as a field of study and interrogation, thus can be seen as a result of the fear of having to concede the constructedness of all labels of ‘identity’.

11 The soothing thought of normality as a stabilizing force has been brought into serious crisis, not least by theories put forward in academic contexts. Of course, the evident current

⁴ Interestingly the easy and unmediated access to internet porn appears to cause lesser fear.

‘identity crisis’ can not only be discerned with regards to gendered and sexual ‘identities,’ but also concerns national and socio-cultural belongings. The widely governing ‘us-versus-them’ politics also become essentialised and naturalized by an angst-inducing, oppositional, stereotypical, and repetitive ‘othering’. However, it is the discursive grounding of gender and sexuality in biology rather than in historically and culturally shaped identities that leads to self-contradictory defense mechanisms instead of conceding the inseparable intersections of biological and social realities and the continuous need to negotiate regulations on sexual activity. In the wake of the #MeToo movement for example, ‘masculinity’ has become a major point of reference and men the targeted group, are either conceived as ‘toxic’ or ‘endangered’. Whereas many men lament the ambiguous demands and expectations concerning their performances ‘as’ men to be one outcome or at least a major factor of the debate, many women likewise shift the debate from established gendered and sexualized power arrangements sheltering and reproducing a continued abuse of power to an alleged policing and limiting of sexual liberties.

12 In this view, the #MeToo debate foremost has instigated the emergence of new social laws of conduct that forcefully sanction “natural” laws of attraction and desire, supposedly instilling paranoia rather than reflection. This line of argument and lament views the current climate as an increased and exaggerated surveillance based on mistrust rather than as an alarming report of sexual abuse and sexual harassment silenced before by institutionalized power structures that not only made these practices possible but also normalized. Apparently, it seems difficult to communicate that problematizing ‘toxic masculinity’ needs to be understood as a social rather than sexual critique. And it seems that by defending masculinity and femininity ‘as’ natural ‘and’ essential (despite being challenged continuously as coherent identities) the emphasis in this debate has been put on the alleged loss of ‘true’ man- and womanhood. Rather than acknowledging the construct that ‘is’ gender, gender identity incessantly becomes invoked as an essential and determinable measure of our belonging. What does it render so difficult to let go of the ‘toxic’ in ‘masculinity’ – as a violent overstepping of personal boundaries - and rather to embrace the liberties that may come with letting go of essentialised and binarised categories of gender and sexuality? In defining people as a natural rather than social group the question of responsibility for such overstepping is transferred from the individual to an identity category: masculinity. It therewith excuses, or at least explains, irresponsible and abusive behavior as a matter of basic ‘male’ instincts running free. Overstepping lines therewith is ‘in men’s predatory nature’, it may even be viewed as ‘part and

parcel' of male sexuality rather than a question of individual sensitivity, empathy, and social responsibility.

13 It appears that the increase of discursive violence against gender studies and the evident rise of new 'conservative' social movements and public demonstrations are telling of a general social climate of growing panic in Western countries. The growing opposition against voices 'disturbing' the established order and 'challenging' clear-cut boundaries, engendering uncertainties, complexity and open-endedness seems inevitable. In such a context an academic discipline insisting on ambiguity (and unknowingness) as a *sine qua no* inevitably must appear suspicious and socially dangerous. To maintain heteronormativity as the 'natural order' and central pivot of social arrangements, gender and queer studies need thus to be relegated to the realms of the 'unscientific', the 'ungrounded', the 'un-real'. They must be perceived as violation of the governing notions of science and knowledge production aiming to 'find' and convey lasting truths, definitions and categories, rather than to challenge them:

What might it mean to learn to live in the anxiety of that challenge, to feel the surety of one's epistemological and ontological anchor go, but to be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be? This means that we must learn to live and to embrace the destruction and rearticulation of the human in the name of a more capacious and, finally, less violent world, not knowing in advance what precise form our humanness does and will take. It means we must be open to its permutations, in the name of nonviolence. (Butler 35)

In a climate of growing uncertainties dramatized as an existential threat in populist rhetoric, belonging to or 'owning' a 'stable identity' may be regarded as a rare privilege. Feeling the security of one's episteme go is no lightweight matter, particularly when it was built upon the idea of surety. In this context 'losing knowledge' must be regarded as alarming and "to live and to embrace the destruction and rearticulation of the human" may even be regarded as an outrageous and irresponsible stance (35). Precisely because academia is often viewed as a detached and privileged space looking top down on society, scientific findings – according to such a line of thought - should provide society with truths to hold on to rather than to continuously challenge (its own) knowledge production and expose the so-called facts as truth *ef-facts*.

14 At a time of 'fake news', 'hoaxes', 'conspiracy theories' and 'alternative facts' questions about the reliability of truth and objectivity have inevitably entered both the public sphere and the media spotlight, highlighting that the contingent line of fact and fiction, of truth and lie may be drawn to very different outcomes and serve very different purposes:

the question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. But it is also [...] a question of power. Having or bearing “truth” and “reality” is an enormously powerful prerogative within the social world, one way in which power dissimulates as ontology. (Butler 215)

When gender and sexual ‘identities’ are predominantly conceived as lived truths and realities, and when heteronormativity is discursively performed as a natural rather than as a social law, the growing impatience with a felt covering or silencing of the ‘real problems’ of the many rather than the few is unsurprising. Queer concerns are increasingly being viewed as identity politics leading to a coerced political correctness, currently debated under the very misleading catchphrase ‘cancel culture’. Conceived as interests of minority and deviant groups, queer interventions supposedly bring to disproportional attention concerns of ‘marginalized’ groups. Who, after all, according to this line of thought ‘really and seriously’ cares about unisex-toilets, the use of the gender gap, -asterisk, or -colon in language, the medical policies, practices, and laws regarding inter* and trans* people, or the right pronouns for non-binary persons? Are there not more important, more pertinent, more pressing questions that need to be addressed and dealt with, questions concerning the well-being of the majority? But then, how is it that heteronormativity remains the norm against which all gender and sexual identities are measured? Whose interests are served by heteronormativity’s naturalization and how can and why is gender dichotomy upheld as an essential means of stabilizing orientation when it may rather be regarded as a performative force of continued misguidance?

15 Gender and queer studies in current public discourse are often referred to in terms of ‘Genderism’, ‘Gender Gaga’ or ‘Gender Ideology’: such demonizing or ridiculing misconceptions – rather indicating panic, ignorance, or both - are dismissing, even twisting the critical interrogation of established discourses, denouncing the critique of a naturalized gender dichotomy as gender ideology. Through such rhetorical twisting, the guardians of heteronormative discourse attempt to stage queer-feminist interventions as ‘minority politics’, ‘re-education programs’ and ‘sectarianism’ suggesting that gender is an invention of gender studies and that queer-feminist activism signifies an abstruse ideology of deviant minorities or of ‘women’ who simply cannot cope with a biologically determined male (sexual) dominance. Heteronormativity continues to assert - and at present even louder - the place of the natural, the true, the original, the majority. It also signifies a primal means of social order by posing as a resort of natural and incontestable belonging even in times of social turmoil and change. The ‘deviant’ persons and discourses imposing their minority concerns on the majority must therefore finally be brought to a halt: enough with the ‘left do-gooders’, ‘political correctness’, ‘cancel culture’, with the social, legal, and cultural concessions granted to ‘minorities’.

16 According to this mindset women have had equal rights ‘for a long time and on all levels’, homosexuals are now ‘even allowed’ to marry, and a ‘third’ option is now ‘even available’. Isn’t that enough? The current antifeminist and anti-queer formations are concerned with securing their naturalized power and privileges that are based on identity categorizations and on their hegemonic power. After all, the governing voices in most mainstream discourses and the media remain patriarchal and heteronormative and maintain interpretative sovereignty and dissemination regarding the gender question. As Michel Foucault repeatedly points out in his writings, discourse is always “that which one struggles for and with which one struggles; it is the power that one seeks to seize” in order to “gain control over opinions, in order to determine through ‘procedures of exclusion’ what lies within and what lies outside the truth” (Foucault 12, 29). Regarding the gender question, the struggles for the dominance over opinions are shaped by rhetorical juxtapositions of objectivity versus emotion, nature versus culture, facts versus ideology, majority versus minority, necessity versus waste of time in a fear to queer the guardians’ of heteronormativity aim to (re)establish the gender (and sexual) binary as the underlying, natural principle of order which is rendered indispensable for every-body’s own gendered self-image as well as human sociality as such.

17 Unfortunately, the fundamental irony on which much of the public debate is founded – whereby ‘gender(ism)’ is staged as an invention ‘by’ and not the subject ‘of’ gender studies - has been given far too little critical attention. At times gender studies scholars themselves have contributed to this common conflation and miscomprehension within public discourse, when for example they refer to ‘gender centres’ (and not ‘centres of gender studies’), when they claim to ‘do/teach gender’ (and not ‘do/teach gender studies’ or ‘investigate gender’) or demand language to be ‘gendered’ now (while it always was, at least in German speaking countries). The reference to gender in current public discourse can therefore signify a critical and complex concept, a derogatory and hostile ascription or a counterintuitively embraced self-labelling of some scholars. At a time when people’s trust in the truth on a socio-political level is strained or even shaken, the desire for seemingly irrefutable facts, for unquestionable stability and rootedness of our existence gains momentum. Where else could we find orientation, security, a deep and lasting meaning of our existence? To contest the naturalness and stability of this truth, to challenge the comfort zone of heteronormativity in this context obviously produces existential panic.

18 In the public mindset, ‘gender’ signifies predominantly as a term referring to radical branches of ‘feminist and lgbtia* politics with gender studies as their academic ally. Along these lines the idea of all gender and sexual identities as context-dependent, temporary, and

fluid is repelled and the discourses pointing out their constructedness are devalued as untruths, as ideology, as loss of ‘reality’. The constant reference to two genders, the abiding recourse to two sexes as our assumed biological foundation of personal identity, and the insistence on the necessity of a relationship between two sexes for reproduction has successfully led to their seemingly undeniable status. As supposedly the most essential part of our selfhood, gender identity has come to constitute an order that for many seems to promise hitherto unambiguous orientations, attributions, and affiliations. To challenge this order means to violate a customary law, an ‘essential’ truth during a time and in a world that is being increasingly unsettled and fragmented by media proliferation, increased digitalization, and globalization. Thus this order must be repeated and maintained through discursive exclusions, through social taboos, through legal sanctions and, if necessary, even with physical violence:

Such violence arises from a deep-rooted desire to maintain the binary gender order as natural or necessary, to make it a structure that no human being can resist and remain human, be it natural or cultural or both. If a person contradicts the norms of the binary classification of the sexes by not only taking a critical stand on it, but by embodying the norms in a critical way, and if this stylized contradiction is readable, then violence obviously arises precisely as a desire to destroy this readability, to question its possibility, to make it unreal. (Butler 35)

The ongoing, polarized ‘battle of the sexes’, the obvious need to confine groups of people to ‘their’ places, is a clear indication of a deep tension ‘and’ alienation generated and perpetuated by binary conceptualized affiliation causing everybody to be confronted with the permanent failure and subsequent frustration to meet the ideals of and demands for ‘femininity and masculinity’. What is debated mostly as the ‘norm’ of gender and sexuality, as ‘true’ femininity and masculinity, rather stands in for a fetishized performative ideal of clear-cut gender and sexual binaries. However, the fragility and insubstantiality of two gender identities must not be laid bare since it has become such a fundamental means of patriarchal power in Western societies as well as an essential anchor of belonging. In order to keep up this heteronormative ideal the struggle for equal rights and equality through queer-feminist activism needs to be defamed by populist media as forced ‘egalitarianism’, as a supposedly absurd, wilful and self-serving denial of the ‘opposites attract’ principle.

19 Many commentaries on the #MeToo debate are pervaded by the assumption of an increasingly pleasure-free, hysterical climate in which ‘men’, or rather ‘male sexuality’ have become the foremost target, while victims and women are merely overreacting. This discursive reversal of perpetrators and victims has since been backed up by many women, probably most notoriously in an open letter in the prestigious newspaper *Le Monde* on January 10th in 2018, in which 100 prominent French women artists and intellectuals condemned the movement:

Today we are educated enough to understand that sexual impulses are, by nature, offensive and primitive - but we are also able to tell the difference between an awkward attempt to pick someone up and what constitutes a sexual assault. [. . .] As women, we don't recognize ourselves in this feminism that, beyond the denunciation of abuses of power, takes the face of a hatred of men and sexuality. We believe that the freedom to say "no" to a sexual proposition cannot exist without the freedom to bother. And we consider that one must know how to respond to this freedom to bother in ways other than by closing ourselves off in the role of the prey. (Chiche et al.)

The #MeToo campaign is accused here because of its seeming denial of the basic principle of desire. The essentialist heteronormative attributions in this letter are more than obvious: "As women" the signatories do not align with a feminism that "takes the face of a hatred of men and sexuality" (Chiche et al.). Despite the fact that men also reported cases of sexual abuse within the #MeToo campaign and that its foremost aim was to lay bare the normalised and trivialised sexual infringements and exploitations taking place in different institutions, the letter suggests an exaggerated animosity against men and a supposed restrictive 'law of desire'. The letter posits a grey area "between an awkward attempt to pick someone up and what constitutes a sexual assault", insinuating that the campaign did not recognise gradual and contextual differences (Chiche et al.).

20 If differences, tensions and oppositional essentialized readings are the underlying prerequisites of heterosexual desire structures and practices, then the critical questioning of dichotomous gender conceptions and the efforts to deconstruct them inevitably disturb, threaten, and distort these 'realities'. Within the framework of such an essentializing heteronormative logic, the infringements brought up in the #MeToo debate are first and foremost expressions of a biological-hormonal program rather than a social malaise of institutionalized power relations. Or, as the letter states, they originate from "sexual impulses [*that*] are, by nature, offensive and primitive" (Chiche et al.). As such they signal an overstepping of a civilised 'boy-meets-girl'-principle perhaps, but nevertheless remain hormonal and evolutionary expressions and thus are biologically explainable and forgivable. The increase in rhetorical, political, and physical violence against interventions and people who denaturalise gender dichotomies and rather point out their effects on social hierarchies thus grows out of a double destabilisation: of that which had been considered to be an essential part of selfhood on the one hand and a means of unambiguous categorical distinctions to delimit and subordinate groups of people on the other.

21 The attempts at shielding patriarchal heteronormativity from feminist and queer interventions are not limited to public or media debates and protests. Queer interrogations in the current political climate within Western, and particularly European, countries increasingly

become delegitimized by state governments, as was made particularly clear in Hungary 2018 by an official ban on gender studies at universities. What knowledge is and who (re)produces knowledge there has now officially been declared to be a state-ly matter, which signifies a serious violation of the freedom of science. It is no coincidence that such a stately intervention is directed at a field of science, which critically investigates existing gender concepts and their interconnectedness with existing and naturalised power relations. According to the heteronormative ordering of gender, a clear distinction between men and women is not only expected but demanded and must therefore be continuously staged, performatively and discursively. It is a matter of maintaining a narrative conveyed as natural law, positioning ‘men’ and ‘women’ in the service of mainly patriarchal interests and reproductive sexuality, according to which heterosexuality appears as both nature and norm that creates human life and secures social reproduction. Read as a social expectation ‘and’ biological law, heterosexuality must exorcise all deviations marking them as deviant ‘special’ cases and categories. Heteronormativity has turned

sex into discourse [...] governed by the endeavour to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction: to say no to unproductive activities, to banish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation. (Foucault 36)

Those who do not conform to heterosexuality’s teleological narrative of sexuality – comforting in its seemingly biological grounding - can therefore not simply be accepted or included as extensions of possibilities or even general potentialities, but need to be categorically devalued, derided or pathologized in all possible apparatuses of power distribution.

22 Gender and sexual ambiguities need to be either continuously covered or conversely clearly marked as subordinate by a political, medical, and socio-cultural apparatus backing up “a sexuality ascribed as essential [. . .] the heterosexual logic of identity – propped up as it is by the notion of a disavowed and projected sexual difference.” (Edelmann 23) It is no coincidence therefore that for example the ‘third option’ in Germany has now become an option for persons that are ‘medically certified’ as persons not belonging to one of the two normalised categories. What is avoided therewith is the possibility for ‘everyone’ to unfollow the governing restrictive logic of gender dichotomy, and to opt for non-binary self-identifications that would denaturalise the two-sex model in general. It becomes obvious that to secure the privileged status of heteronormativity in scientific, political, juridical, medical and media discourses, challenging the gender binary must remain ascribable to the alleged categorical gender and sexual deviations of so-called minorities. The denaturalisation of a discursively produced and coercively performed ‘natural’ and ‘given’ gender binary by scientific and activist interventions

highlights its historical, androcentric, and heteronormative order and thus point to its fragility and contestability as well as the involvement of ‘everybody’ in its possible (de-)stabilisation. In this context the increasing socio-political panic, nervousness and aggression gives evidence to the felt need for new measures to clearly demarcate the territory and to relegate ‘queerness’ and deconstruction to the margins.

23 Along these lines heteronormativity as the biologist foundation of social order, patriarchal self-images, and national identities has recently manifested itself in an aggressive campaign against the impact of queer theory and activism in Poland. Launched in early 2019 the campaign for “LGBT-free zones” by the right-wing conservative weekly *Gazeta Polska* called for “renouncing the promotion of tolerance for LGBTI persons”. In March 2019, the first municipalities began to declare themselves to be “LGBT-free” zones. Jaroslaw Kaczyński, leader of the right-wing conservative governing party Law and Justice (PiS), warned of an “LGBT ideology” posing a “threat” to the traditional Polish family (Ciobanu). A legislative initiative against sex education in schools had been brought before the EU Parliament in November 2019 by the Polish Parliament. Members of the European Parliament criticized this as ‘further stigmatization’ of homo- and transsexual people in Poland where ‘gay pride’ parades and individuals had already been violently attacked several times (cf. “Parliament Strongly Condemns ‘LGBTI-Free Zones’ in Poland”). Of course, the self-proclaimed LGBT-free zones perform ‘merely’ a symbolic act of heteronormativist separation; but backed up by the current political climate of the country they perform a dangerous legislation of fear-spreading, discrimination, and violence. They signify an effective act of ostracism and exclusion of groups of people who are no longer understood ‘simply’ as deviant and as a minority, but as subversive forces that could pervert social and national order. Such state-supported or even sponsored practices foreground the extent of the underlying panic informing such counter-mobilizations.

24 From a queer theorist’s and activist’s viewpoint the attacks on gender studies as ‘dangerous ideology’, ‘minority politics’ or ‘re-education programs’ must therefore be understood as efforts to limit the gradual ‘dethroning’ of white, straight male privilege that has already been brought about by feminist, people of color, and queer interventions. The anti-queer or anti- gender studies mobilizations are ‘not’ about peripheral genders and sexualities, but about heteronormativity as the safeguard of the ‘nuclear family’, and of the social and national order associated with it. As Judith Butler notes:

I think to the degree that gender is understood as an attack on the heteronormative and patriarchal family form it is also understood to attack national identity. Gender is figured as this thing that comes from somewhere else. It’s an import, a dangerous, urban import from the west. It will undermine their society, national identity, ways of ordering society. I think as economic instability grows, the attack on migrants

escalates with the attack on gender and both become ways to reconsolidate the family in its traditional form and society in its alleged ethnic purity. (Butler et al.)

To reconsolidate the family in its traditional form also appears to be a major concern of the Catholic Church which also speaks of a dangerous gender ideology that must be stopped. Of course, the interest of the Catholic Church in the 'traditional family' and its demonizing of gender studies is not the same as governmental bans or public media attacks. However, all seem to arise from the fear of losing the socio-historic foundation, legitimation, and solidification of an institutionalized power distribution supposedly based on nature:

The Vatican office that lays down the official line for Roman Catholic educational institutions released a new document [. . .] that dismisses the scientifically accepted idea that gender identity is fluid as "nothing more than a confused concept of freedom in the realm of feelings and wants." Calling the current thinking an attempt to "annihilate the concept of 'nature,'" the Congregation for Catholic Education insisted that biology decides what is "constitutive of human identity" and called for the reaffirming of "the metaphysical roots of sexual difference." "Efforts to go beyond the constitutive male-female sexual difference, such as the ideas of 'intersex' or 'transgender,' lead to a masculinity or femininity that is ambiguous," says the document. That, in turn, has resulted in cultural "disorientation" and the destabilization of the family as an institution. "This oscillation between male and female becomes, at the end of the day, only a 'provocative' display against so-called 'traditional frameworks,'" it says. (Aviles et al.)

Heads of state 'and' church apparently fear a loss of – their patriarchal – power, resorting to natural and/or divine laws which cannot or should not be questioned, and which should be supported and solidified by science as established 'truths'. The paradox that heteronormativity is built upon becomes ever more apparent, because if heterosexuality and gender dichotomy were 'natural' and 'normal' – as the document by the Vatican office upholds - and if any other sexual or gender configuration were a question of minor(ity) interest, why then is there a seeming necessity for such panic, for regulating laws, bans, and public defamations? This seems to indicate an underlying awareness but unwillingness to accept the permeability and contingency of all gender and sexual attributions, to acknowledge a general ambiguity and uncertainty that needs to be kept in check. The discipline of gender studies is thus seen as political 'primarily' because it does not adhere to and back up current politics.

25 The privileged thus strike back. According to the self-serving logic and interest of those in power, scientific research and teaching should confirm, and solidify social order. If heteronormativity is to be recognized and maintained as a timeless natural - or 'divine' - order and cannot be questioned as a temporary social one, queer activism, investigations and interventions must be marked as scientifically untenable, as socially disruptive, and as ethically irresponsible. To maintain notions of order and identity the admittance of individual

ambiguities and vulnerabilities as the basis and possibility of social understanding beyond categorical attributions must be overwritten, outperformed or even directly violently obstructed. The increase in media bashings, aggressive language, and the ostentatious drawing of boundaries in relation to feminist and queer interventions have to be countered by an increase in efforts to work towards a general admittance of growing and encompassing uncertainties in a world experienced as increasingly complex, not as threat but as potential.

26 The overall denial of uncertainty has led to a devaluation and distortion of the contributions of gender studies to non-violent social interaction, to an increasing inclusiveness and equality, and to a broader concept of lived realities. In a blatant inversion of power structures queer interventions against violent and exclusionary language as well as against stereotyping, and derogatory forms of representation are now publicly mediated as obstructions of free speech and artistic license, as the most current catchphrase of ‘cancel culture’ suggests. Gender Studies are at least partly held responsible for a current climate of increased irritability, aggravated identity politics, coerced language policies and socio-cultural debasement. But is theory’s responsibility to safeguard what is ‘assumed’ or ‘hoped’ to be indisputably ‘natural and normal’? Is it not the most important task of science to foster critical thinking, to support investigations into the validity and partiality of received knowledge, and to challenge precisely the truth-effects of such naturalized and hegemonic concepts and their ordering and regulating effects on social life? With regards to the growing fearmongering and “us-versus-them” politics in many countries around the world, where hardline patriarchal authorities provide simple answers by setting off the ‘norm’ from the ‘deviation’, and thus by fortifying (b)orders and hierarchies, it maybe even more important for science to defend critical thinking and truthfulness in its complexity. Gender Studies’ stress on situated knowledges, on discursive and performative identities, on socio-cultural rather than biological attributions and hierarchisations is not a delusional escape from but a responsible move towards realities. “In the name of a more capacious and, finally, less violent world”, as Butler suggests (35), “a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world” as Haraway proposes (579), science cannot bow down to socio-political interests, cannot simplify or pacify inconvenient truths in order to please . Truths must be told; sciences must be bold.

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