

Pinar Tuzçu

## **F**eminisms Reloaded: Contested Terrains in Times of Anti-Feminism, Racism, and Austerity

The Women and Gender Studies Section of the German Sociological Association  
2015 Annual Conference

*(First Speaker: Encarnación Rodríguez, Second Speaker: Tomke König)*

The conference “Feminisms Reloaded: Contested Terrains in Times of Anti-Feminism, Racism, and Austerity” was held at Justus-Liebig University, Giessen, Germany, December 3–5, 2015. The aim of the conference was to create a platform for discussion about the increasing attacks on Gender and Women’s Studies in Europe. From a critical sociological perspective, the conference aimed to map the link between anti-gender discourses and the current social and economic situations concerning migration and austerity policies in Germany and beyond. By gathering speakers from various European Union (EU) countries, such as Spain, the United Kingdom (UK), Greece, Finland, and Sweden, the conference successfully fostered critical debate and dialogue on the issues of economic, social, and rhetorical vigilantism against refugees and gender studies in civic- and state-oriented policies. The papers presented at the conference sought to answer the following question: “What kind of relationality turns these different actors into a common target of the rising far-right parties and organizations in Europe?”

The conference started with a stimulating presentation led by Diana Mulinari (Sweden). In her paper “Anti-feminist Agenda? Exploring Right-Wing Xenophobic Parties,” Mulinari discussed the process of the discursive shift from the notion of race to the notion of cultural difference that has occurred in Swedish populist right-wing parties’ political agenda. By analyzing the role of mainstream feminism in this discursive shift, Mulinari discussed the crossroads at which feminist rhetoric finds itself, that is, how it reproduces or is being instrumentalized by the rhetoric of far-right groups and political parties in Sweden. By pointing at the unexpected success of the far-right Sweden Democrats Party, in her keynote address, she argued that the party’s public position on the issue of gender equality and “feminism” is remarkably controversial. Although the party upholds gender equality as a European value and, therefore, claims that gender inequality must be maintained and protected, the party’s political agenda stands against feminism since feminism is assumed to demolish and undermine the continuity of the nation-state. Highlighting this controversy, Mulinari argued that the feminist and the Sweden Democrats’ perception of gender equality as a European value, however, put these supposedly mutually exclusive actors in discursive proximity. For, as Mulinari stated, Nordic feminist policies perceive the current immigration wave from non-EU countries mostly as a threat to their achievement of the long-term struggle for gender equality. In this sense, migrants are seen by mainstream feminists and the far-right party as potential agents for undoing Eurocentric progressivism. Mulinari concluded that even though these two political sides do not see one another as their genuine alliances, the far-right party instrumentalizes the debate on gender equality in their political agenda to promote civic vigilance against migrants and refugees. Exclusionary Nordic mainstream feminist politics, however, wittingly or unwittingly comply with this xenophobic agenda by taking gender equality as a must-be-defended European value against refugees and non-European migrants.

The economic dimension of this debate was brought up by Anna Carastathis’s (Lisbon) paper “Whose Crisis? Crisis? Border Thinking about Debt, Austerity, Migration, and Racism.” In her sophisticated analysis, Carastathis mapped how the financial and refugee crises intertwined materially and discursively in Greece. She argued that the public

perception of migrants and refugees is instrumentalized by left- and right-wing political organizations and parties to construct the narrative of a nationalized and territorialized crisis in Greece. Introducing the concept “nested crisis,” Carastathis discussed how Greek political actors narrativized the “we” and “they” division by seeing the economic crisis as a collective “national” experience while representing the refugee crisis as a global experience. In this narrative, according to Carastathis, Greece, which is seen as a victim of “debt colonialism,” which designates the occupation of supranational financial institutions, is represented as an imaginary refugee of the EU zone. Although this narrativization might promise a sense of discursive empathy with refugees from war-torn countries to the some extent, it nevertheless largely excludes them from the “collective experience” of the financial crisis simply because they do not possess Greek citizenship. Carastathis further argued that this type of exclusionary narrative that generated a different form of nationalism in Greece, which is affectively related to the refugees’ social status, however, ran into the risk of instrumentalizing and obscuring their material needs. She concluded that this narrative of solidarity and politics of empathy with the refugees in Greece remained largely at the discursive level by establishing a new form of otherizing practices in the “ownership” of the financial crisis.

In the keynote address “Saving and Reproducing the Nation: Education and Families as Sites of Contestation,” Umut Erel (London) dealt with the national narration of the politics of care. Discussing the politics of care in the context of far-right political parties, Erel pointed at the current paradigm shift in the nationalist neoliberal political agenda in Europe. In this agenda, refugees are not merely seen as a threat to a “home country” but are also depicted as victims who have lost their “own” country. Therefore, the political actors seemed to be concerned with the return of these groups to their home countries. In this respect, this rhetoric departs from the clichéd right-wing discourse of refugees as a threat and launches a new rhetoric of care that claims “everybody is better off in their home.” However, as Erel argued, by creating “concerned parents” images, nationalist neoliberal care politics targets not only agents such as migrants and refugees but also concepts and movements such as multiculturalism and feminism, for it is claimed that both phenomena disunite the nation by dismantling its white, homogenous, masculine, and heteronormative construction. According to Erel, this narration of threat emerges from two key sides of reproducing the nation: family and higher education. Although feminism in higher education is portrayed as producing and spreading destructive knowledge against the nation’s values, ethnic minority families are depicted as undermining the cultural continuity of national identity.

Suvi Keskinen (Finland), in the paper “‘War against Multiculturalism,’ White Border Guard Masculinities, and Anti-racist Responses,” illustrated the issue of how repudiation of multiculturalism, in far-right policy, becomes the bedrock of defending the white heteronormative family as the nucleus of a nation in Finland. Keskinen highlighted that the concept of multiculturalism was dismissed not only by far-right political parties and organizations but also by the state authorities. With the rising number of refugees, the failure of multiculturalism was brought once more into public debate and represented as a missed opportunity by the “tolerant,” if not naïve, citizens of Europe. Keskinen showed how this rhetoric inspired many xenophobic and racist demonstrations and events in Finland. Introducing the concept “white guard masculinities and femininities,” Keskinen analyzed demonstrations in which male protesters formed a human wall against refugees at the Finnish–Belgium border while female demonstrators, who called themselves

“concerned mothers,” made speeches about why it is important for them to protect their children from foreign subjects. However, as Keskinen claimed, these anti-refugee protests and political statements also created strong disbelief and counter-reactions among the Finnish public. For instance, many anti-feminists and racialized minorities organized several events through blogs and radio programs and built alliances between various anti-racist groups and organizations worldwide.

The importance of this type of alliance in the era of anti-genderism in Europe was discussed by Andrea Petö (Hungary) in the paper “Anti-gender Movements in Europe: Possible Interpretation Frameworks.” With the phrase “gender as a symbolic glue,” Petö described how far-right discourses and alliances merge traditional rightist discourses and policies around the concept of gender to promote a new political field of struggle. According to Petö, however, since anti-genderism is new in Europe, creating alliances against the anti-gender movement requires new approaches and new vocabularies for developing more effective strategies. Petö argued that the “embedded” struggles in institutions, for instance, in churches, as churches are the most active institutions of the anti-gender movement in Europe, can be grounded and connected with different groups and organizations involved in similar struggles. Thus, transnational connections are important for building such strategies, but grounding the local connections, which are largely rendered invisible or suppressed by certain institutions and organizations, is also essential to form new alliances. In this sense, she further argued that these strategies should not only be based on reacting to anti-genderism but should also aim for an independent and long-term policy. For such independent strategies, Petö claimed, “dialogue” is a key term.

In the paper “Who Is Afraid of Feminism? Paving the Way for a Feminist Queer-antiracist Agenda in the New Political Arena in Spain,” Carmen Romero Bachiller (Madrid) discussed the complex panorama trans-feminist, queer, and antiracist agenda in Spain during the current crisis and the emergence of new social movements and political parties. Romero Bachiller stated that the urgency of the economic recovery led to the suspension of public investment in anti-sexist, anti-racist, and anti-discriminatory politics. This lack of interest in such policies also created a political gap within the feminist and public scene, in which very minority extreme-right groups and discriminatory policies, for example, emerged and spread. For instance, a far-right group that offered food only for Spanish citizens became visible in public, and the managers of the Spanish social health system decided to exclude a number of groups, mostly people without papers, from accessing public health care services in Spain. Meanwhile, this type of discriminatory policy triggered harsh criticism from the Spanish public and created movements such as “Yo sí Sanidad Universal,” which disobeyed and provided health care for those who are legally excluded from the Spanish social health system. By mapping how austerity politics were used as legitimate and legal sites for discrimination and exclusion, Romero Bachiller discussed how political parties such as Ciudadanos and Podemos are still ignoring or becoming less willing to deal with gender equality or, more precisely, with feminist demands in this context.

The conference continued with the “Open Space: Discussion on Entanglements and Interventions” session. Stimulated by the questions handed in before the meeting, the discussion was focused on three levels: the future of gender studies, institutional racism and local experiences of institutional racism, and possible interventions and intersections.

### **Future of gender studies**

The debate's kick-off question was how gender studies could resist the rising anti-gender movement and render gender studies sustainable for the future despite anti-gender attacks. However, some participants approached the concept "the future" cautiously and called for an open discussion on what the future stands for in "the future of gender studies." The central argument was that longing or concern about "the future" might obscure the present's problems and issues that we must deal with "here and now." Instead of focusing on and being concerned about the future, some participants argued that remaining in "the here and now" might be a better strategic move for an emphasis on the current debates and to develop more radical and efficient intellectual and communal reactions against the repudiation of gender studies in Europe.

The second argument was, when we talk about the future of gender studies, we also need to be more interrogative about whose future we are discussing as gender studies is a field in which diverse individuals are positioned. Therefore, while developing these strategies, we should remain critical of the essentialization of "gender studies." In this sense, what must be taken into account is locationality, that is, to remain specific about from where and which position we are talking when we talk about "gender studies." Furthermore, the participants posed questions such as, what is the relation between German feminism and the institutionalization of gender studies? How did the institutionalization of gender studies in Germany also create a fertile ground for mainstreaming gender? Who has been included and who has been excluded in this institutionalization process?

Taking on the question of exclusion and inclusion, some participants argued that to efficiently analyze this process, we need to tease out the white, heteronormative, and colonial construction of gender in Germany. They also claimed that this approach might be useful for finding the link among anti-genderism, austerity policies, and racist sentiments in Germany and beyond. Thus, pursuing local histories and local debates becomes methodologically essential to map this link.

### **Institutional racism and local experiences**

The second level of the discussion evolved around these local experiences and debates. The debate went on with the question of why people of color in particular do not remain in German academia and how gender studies curricula still carry traces of white and colonial sentiments. Institutionalization of the postcolonial feminist perspective, alongside gender studies, as some participants claimed, is particularly necessary in German higher education, as discrimination and exclusion are a still large part of academia in Germany. In this respect, anti-racist academic debates exist and are produced through the rhetoric and contribution of women of color who are mostly excluded from the institutional acknowledgment.

Some participants argued that in addition to gender and ethnicity, we need to consider how class operates in the process of institutionalization. In this respect, the line of the discussion once again made it clear that the theory of intersectionality might have been exhausted at the academic level, but institutional practice remains absent.

### **Possible interventions and intersections**

Some participants claimed that to practice the intersectionality approach as an intervention into the institutional structure, we need to reflect on how to put Marxist thoughts and anti-racist feminism into a dialogue and create situated critical perspectives

inside and outside academia. This question urges us to think about which strategies of knowledge production and circulation should be embraced to prevent the exclusion of non-white, non-hetero, non-elite women from academia. If, for instance, we consider higher education as a neoliberal factory of knowledge, it is essential to think what is being produced for the market and what kinds of knowledge are being eliminated, filtered, censored, and ignored. In this sense, a postcolonial anti-racist Marxist feminist/queer intervention should not only put its energy to prove why gender studies should be considered scientific but should also remain critical of what is seen as scientific, what type of science is upheld, and what type of science is neglected in the realm of higher education.

The open space session ended up with a concrete suggestion to combine public sociology and gender studies to achieve visibility and gain publicity for gender studies that remains openly critical of itself and its process of institutionalization instead of merely dealing with critics.

The final day started with a paper presented by Elena Zdravomyslova (St. Petersburg): "Conservative Mobilization in Contemporary Russia: National Ideas/Ideologies, Gender Naturalism, and Anti-Feminism." Zdravomyslova claimed that in Russia, authorities take the issue of gender seriously in their political agenda; however, they used the term to reject and falsify it. Zdravomyslova argued that after Russian authorities openly declared that the state ideology of Russia is conservative, the concept of gender was framed in this conservative state apparatus and reappropriated to spread nationalist ideas. Strikingly, as Zdravomyslova demonstrated in her presentation, in the mid-2000s, the official authorities declared the high level of mobilization of this political approach and took the concept of gender as a central political motivation. The belated entry of the word gender in Russian policy, as Zdravomyslova argued, might be because the translation of gender does not have an adequate match in the Russian language. Therefore, the concept of gender in Russian conservative and nationalist state policy is vaguely defined. In this sense, Zdravomyslova said that using the untranslated version of the word "gender" might be seen, by those political authorities, as an opportunity to attack it, as the term does not connote biological sex, as it would in Russian, but designates the construction of gendered social roles that are derived from sexual self-identification. Interestingly, Zdravomyslova showed that in Putin's Russia, the word gender is highly politicized, yet it is used as the field of reproducing conservative rhetoric that ranges from the anti-abortion debate to anti-gay laws and from the well-being of the nation's children and to resistance against "the morally corrupt West."

The final paper of the conference, "The (Con-) Textual Aesthetics of Philosophical Imagining in Feminist Postcoloniality," was presented by Mariam Popal (Bayreuth). Focusing on English and Afghan literature, Popal analyzed the question of "reloading" from the perspective of de-colonial and postcolonial feminism. Popal argued that in the process of "reloading" feminism we are still not that far away from the essentialist notion of woman and the practice of silencing. She claimed that, in particular, with the current shift in humanities to new materialism/realism that revolves around institutional neoliberal diversity tokenism we are trapped in another level of essentialism and, in fact, another level of thanatopolitics. Conversion of the concepts of life and death after 9/11 created another form of colonialism that is implanted in neo-racism, neo-orientalism, and new materialist warfare. Popal contended that this conversion in particular reveals the geopolitics of the intersection of racism and misogynist thanatopolitics in the discourse of

new materialist colonialism.

The conference ended with comments by Noa Ha (Berlin) and Nadia Shehadeh (Berlin) in the final plenary. Shehadeh stated that the conference was insightful and productive regarding navigating different issues and topics that created a space for linking austerity, racism, and the increase in anti-gender discourse. What was crucial in those debates, according to Shehadeh, was that it is important to bring up the question of which feminism or whose feminism we are talking about. However, she stated that the papers gave her the impression that we perhaps need to reconsider and reclaim the term “womanism” from a non-Eurocentric perspective and use this word again in the feminist agenda. We also need to address how mainstream feminism has instrumentalized topics such as racism, ethnicity, and class. To achieve a successful public debate regarding the link among anti-genderism, austerity, and the rise of the far-right political movement in Europe, Shehadeh argued that we do not need to draw on U.S. feminist experiences but should remain local and deal with the forms of feminism based in Germany, what historical process feminism went through, and what lessons we should take from its historical and contemporary proceedings.

Ha observed that to arrive at the local level we need to create and learn how to build an “accountable space” for such discussions. In this sense, in this accountable space, we can also analyze the genealogy of gender in the European context and the relation of gender to the colonial past and present. According to Ha, as the transnational context was the focus of the conference and many different perspectives were presented from various nation-state policies, this focus encourages us to map the intersection of gender and the nation-state in order to understand how terms such as state feminism, institutionalized feminism, and mainstream feminism have emerged. The conference’s attempt to link the issues of austerity, racism, and anti-genderism, Ha also asserted, urges us to think how to include the issue of refugees in the feminist curricula.

### **Conference outcomes**

The conference showed that anti-genderism might be new in Europe, but it operates as an organized, systematic political wave. The papers presented in the context of the “Feminisms Reloaded: Contested Terrains in Times of Anti-Feminism, Racism, and Austerity” conference made it clear how gender-related issues such as the struggle against sexual violence, gender inequality and unequal distributions of national wealth are utilized to legitimize xenophobia and austerity politics in the course of the “unexpected” refugee flow to Europe and its neighbors. The intriguing content of the conference also urged us to think further how feminism should or could deal with these critical and complex issues without being trapped in rhetorical vigilantism, such as being under attack, being concerned about its ‘future’, which is reminiscent of far-right nationalist discourse.

### **Dr. Pinar Tuzçu**

Fachbereich 05, Gesellschaftswissenschaften  
Universität Kassel  
pinar-tuzcu@uni-kassel.de