

Anti-gender Politics and Queer Theory

IN WHAT WAYS can queer theoretical approaches to anti-gender politics offer meaningful insights into and new perspectives on how to respond to, alleviate and complicate the analysis of reactionary mobilisations, inside, outside and on the borders of the academy? Whereas recent years have seen a wealth of scholarly publishing on anti-gender campaigns, much of which chronicles the organised, networked, and transnational attacks on LGBTQ+ populations and gender and queer studies and scholars, there have been relatively few concerted engagements that seek to analyse these campaigns and their effects through the lens of queer theory itself. We were curious about what added knowledge about current anti-gender politics – defined in short as reactionary and populist mobilisations against gender equality and sexual democracy (see e.g., Graff & Korolczuk 2022) – could be gleaned from engaging queer theory. To this end, by utilising our editorship of *lambda nordica*, we wanted to offer a platform for exploring the conceptual tools that queer theory can offer in the project of analysing reactionary mobilisations against gender, sexuality, and democracy itself, and – perhaps – inspire us to move towards generative futures, politically and theoretically.

This special issue examines contemporary anti-gender politics and contains a number of promising theoretical lenses from sociological,

psychoanalytic, queer, trans, gender and feminist scholarship that may contribute to an understanding of their complexities. In so doing, it offers careful, generative critiques and highlights some of the limitations of existing approaches, including those of one-dimensionality, historical presentism, racism, nationalism and femonationalism.

Anti-gender Presence in Academia and Its Effects

Shortly after commencing our editorship of *lambda nordica* in spring 2020, we decided to plan a special issue on anti-gender politics in relation to LGBTQ+ and queer scholarship and liveability. It felt urgent then, and it feels even more urgent now as we are wrapping up the editorial work in early 2023. Anti-gender attacks on academic gender studies programs and individual scholars, especially those of us who identify as queer, non-binary or trans or work in such fields, proliferate in many countries in Europe (e.g., Verloo & Paternotte 2018; Ergas, Kochkorova, Petó & Trujillo 2022), and globally (e.g., Sabitova 2018; Teixeira 2019). These attacks must, of course, be understood in relation to broader attacks on academic freedom worldwide. As Andrea Petó has argued, academic gender studies being a critical field that seeks change, opens it to attacks from anti-gender movements that accuse it of being unscientific and ideologically driven. Petó suggests that the spreading of anti-gender attacks on gender, feminist and queer studies in many countries, indexes broader dangers for academic freedom and critical knowledge production in other fields as well (Stork 2022). Similarly, Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, in their recent book *Anti-gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (reviewed in this issue), argue that academia is a key site of struggle in that anti-gender campaigners specifically seek to undermine gender studies scholars and scholarship, by ambitiously building alternative knowledge platforms profiled as scientifically legitimate and rational through endless self-referencing and circular citations of “intellectual celebrities” with academic titles, such as Gabriela Kuby and Kathleen Stock (Graff & Korolczuk 2022, 60–61). While one is easily exhausted by such orchestrated, ideology-driven attacks and their populist reception amongst politicians, in the media and by university

leadership, it is extremely important that scholars speak out and organise against such initiatives. In the current situation, it is a never-ending task to challenge anti-gender claims to legitimate scientific knowledge and the task must be approached collectively, through building an archive of sound scholarly knowledge, grounded in critical gender and queer theory.

Developing this special issue inspired us to organise a themed panel for the 2022 edition of the Nordic gender and feminist research (NORA) conference, “Tensions and potentials in Nordic feminist and gender research” (University of Oslo, Norway, June 20–22). Titled “Challenging anti-gender politics with postcolonial, feminist and queer theory” the panel included three of the authors also featured in this special issue: Maria Brock, Jenny Evang and Míša Stekl. The formidable response and interest in the panel from the audience was an important source of motivation and support for us, while having to deal with significant difficulty and backlash due to our engagement with anti-gender politics in our respective research fields and our media engagements (see e.g., Engebretsen 2022; Demker & Alm 2022). Attempts to stifle our research on anti-gender campaigns by way of making police and research ethics complaints, and backlash from parts of the public when we participate in media debates, are just some of the unpleasanties we have had to deal with and juggle alongside our editorial work recently.

Indeed, there is now ample scholarship that demonstrates the close relationship between transnational (and local) anti-gender movements, right-wing, reactionary and populist actors, including political parties (e.g., Graff & Korolczuk 2022; Kovats & Poim 2015). “Anti-gender campaigns,” as these networks are called for short, pointedly target academia, and gender, queer, anti-racist and feminist studies in particular (Petó 2022). In their article, “Why Following the Rules Will Not Stop Them: An Exploration of Anti-gender Presence in Swedish Universities,” Lena Martinsson and Diana Mulinari analyse the rhetorical arguments and political strategies of anti-gender attacks on critical scholarship founded in social justice paradigms and visions, such as gender and queer studies, in Swedish academic institutions. Import-

tantly, Martinsson and Mulinari not only expose the ways in which reactionary anti-gender discourses threaten and limit critical research and researchers, for example by accusing them of being “ideological” and “unscientific.” They also critique the broader process of stifling gender studies through university management practices and the academic leadership’s insistence on defending the social order and following – allegedly – politically neutral laws and regulations; think for example of how the principles of “freedom of speech” and “democratic majority” can be instrumentalised by opponents in a controversy. This is a highly politicised governing tactic of authoritarian depoliticisation (Martinsson’s and Mulinari’s term), and an especially urgent matter for critical scholars to interrupt, expose and challenge, and not (un)wittingly reproduce. This governing tactic, Martinsson and Mulinari argue, constitutes an anti-democratic transformation and undermining of the basic premise of academic knowledge production and dissemination, and we must interrupt it by engaging in research that vitally addresses social justice, discrimination and equality – with truth-seeking, objectivity expanding, and empirically solid scholarly work at the core.

As such, this very special issue and the overwhelming interest it has received, judging by the many fantastic abstracts that were submitted in response to the call for papers, are testaments to the importance of engaging in and supporting eminent scholarship on anti-gender politics. It is an urgent matter to facilitate and engage in collaboratively dedicated academic research and debate on the various manifestations of anti-gender politics in the Nordic region and onwards, particularly the ways in which academic gender, queer and trans scholarship at Nordic universities is systematically targeted by diverse actors, and the kinds of responses and silences the attacks elicit.

In urging more attention to anti-gender attacks on Nordic feminist and queer studies and advocating for collaborations and acts of solidarity, we are inspired by the eminent and growing scholarship on illiberal and reactionary challenges to academic freedom. For example, in discussing the ways in which illiberal policies aggravate attacks on gender studies programs in Central and Eastern Europe, authors Yasmine Ergas, Jazgul

Kochkorova, Andrea Pető and Natalia Trujillo argue the importance of paying more attention to the everyday resistance strategies of gender studies programs and scholars, and encourage us “to reconstitute ‘communities of learning and teaching’”, “participate in ‘solidarity academies’” and other forms of “extra-institutional organization of knowledge production and dissemination” (2022: 127). Attacks aimed to undermine and even erase institutional gender studies (including queer and LGBTQ+ studies), could, they suggest, “catalyze institutional innovation” (ibid.). Elsewhere Marianna Szczygielska has powerfully argued that “When we are under pressure, we should stand up for what our research field actually works with. Say that it includes queer studies, trans studies, crip studies, and so on. We must be careful so that we don’t undermine our field because we don’t dare to show all of its various niches” (cited in Lilleslätten 2018).

Theorising Transphobia’s Multi-Dimensionality

In the article “Pose: Deconstructing Fragility, Identity, and Transphobia”, Natacha Kennedy seeks to explore and theorise possible origins of contemporary transphobia, especially the intensified attacks on trans people’s basic human rights in the UK. To this end, Kennedy develops a queer sociological approach to social activity method (SAM), and analyses select scenes from the US television series *Pose* (2018–2021; three seasons), about queer, (mainly) Latina and African-American ballroom culture in New York City. In aiming to “construct a sociological characterisation that can begin to account for the existence of transphobia in a way that explains the organised and coordinated attacks on trans people” from a myriad of (seemingly) different groups, Kennedy’s project here is an ambitious and laudable one. Developing the concept of *deformance* based on McGann and Samuels (2001), and emphasising the socio-cultural process of *identification*, Kennedy proceeds to argue that “White, middle-class ‘gender-critical’ transphobia has, at its root, a tacit fear of its own fragility and inauthenticity, a fear projected onto trans people, especially trans women.”

This analysis is highly relevant for academic queer studies. “Queer-class-race stratification in higher education is mundane,” reflects Matt

Brim in his remarkable study of (US-based) institutional queer studies and structural inequality in academia, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Brim 2020: 194). While queer theory, in principle, has been meaning to be particularly attentive to critiques of inequality, power and domination, it is also the case that the field oftentimes itself colludes in upholding unequal structures of academic elitism, through for example ignoring existing multi-dimensionality of inequality, domination, discrimination and violence. In the context of Nordic academic feminism, Ulrika Dahl has identified epistemic habits of whiteness that effectively turn issues of race and racism and critiques of whiteness into, at best, secondary topics of theorisation (Dahl 2021). On this basis, we would argue that the reach of reactionary, transnational anti-gender movements emphasises the need for careful, multi-dimensional analyses and epistemic critiques of dominant trends within the broad interdisciplinary field of queer studies, of the kind so eloquently proposed by Natacha Kennedy.

Thinking Expansively About Reactive Politics

This endeavour further necessitates careful analyses of encounters with transphobia and hate. Indeed, a central concern in much research that unpacks anti-gender politics, is that of LGBTQ+ activism and social movements that struggle against reactionary sentiments in politics, media, academia, and society at large. Oftentimes it seems as though activists are locked in a reactive and responsive mode, which in turn prevents them from directing resources towards longer-term generative activist work. How to think differently about this, largely externally enforced, reactive modus? In the article “Swedish LGBTQ Activists’ Responses to Neo-Nazi Threats: Anti-gender Politics, State Appellation and Political Aspirations”, Ida Linander, Johanna Lauri and Marcus Lauri examine the political implications and responsive articulations of LGBTQ activists dealing with neo-nazi threats, and on this basis formulate ways to strengthen the struggle for future liberation. Developing a conceptual approach based on political discourse theory and psychoanalytic perspectives on “fantasy”, they especially look at the ways in

which neo-Nazi threats shape activist understandings and articulations of a caring state in seeking legal rights, the ideal of conflict-free politics as a goal and a broader historical narrative as a vital identification and motivation for current activism. Linander, Lauri and Lauri argue that the reactive mode of the activists, read through a conceptualisation of fantasy, can be understood as generative of collective political LGBTQ+ mobilisation – in the short term but also in longer-term struggles for future conflict-free, liberated lives. At the same time, the authors caution against understating the presence of conflict and divergent political ideologies within LGBTQ movements, and argue that notions of the neo-Nazi threat as the “other” that necessitates strategic response, can be instrumental in making conflict visible and inspire collective work and alliance-building between different LGBTQ groups and similar organisations.

The Racist Genealogies of Anti-gender Politics

Among scholars that critically examine contemporary anti-gender politics, the question of the temporality of anti-gender mobilisation and theorising has generated productive discussions on current anti-gender movements being a distinctively new phenomenon that must be analysed as such (Kováts 2016, Kováts 2020, Pető 2021), the need to trace the genealogies of contemporary anti-gender politics in order to better understand its changing form and content (Case 2019), and the role of history and historiography as points of ideological struggle for anti-gender theorists (Graff & Korolczuk 2022). Several contributions in this issue detail the historical entanglements of contemporary expressions of anti-gender rhetoric and practice, showing how particular strands of thought, even concrete problem formulations and lines of argumentation, have ideological traction across time and space.

Miša Stekl urges us to pay more attention to the racist underpinnings of Western gender systems in general, and cis-normative systems in particular. Using a particular case in their essay, “Sauvons les enfants de la loi Taubira’: On the Anti-Blackness of French Anti-gender Politics”, namely that of the vitriolic attacks on the former French Minister of

Justice Christiane Taubira by anti-gender organisers, Stekl shows how their racist ungendering of Taubira is an essential part of the critique of her politics, and how misogynoir is at the core of not only anti-gender theories, but also some versions of self-branded feminist theory.

One of the master narratives of contemporary anti-gender politics, that of so-called replacement theory, shares significant ideological components with, for example, the theory of the degeneration of Western culture, popular among European politicians and scholars at the *fin de siècle* (see e.g., Magubane 2001). Degeneration theory took its departure in the hypothesis that racial hierarchies are expressed in separate and distinct cultures on a linear scale of civilisation, and identified homosexuality, capitalism and the feminisation of public discourse as perils that threaten the West's high culture, since a high degree of differentiation between the races, classes and sexes was thought to be a sign of a highly developed culture. In modern terms we might talk about it as a conservative mobilisation for a racialized and classed gender system that relied on the separation and hierarchisation of gender and sex identities, roles, and expressions. A system in which homosexuality, gender non-conforming behaviour and liberation movements based on mobilisation for women's and workers' rights, and critique of colonial systems and dogmatic religious standards of conduct, was seen as indicative of the culture being at a crisis. Conflicts were often played out as debates about the ethics of governing – the family, the people, the nation, human civilisation – and hence also as debates about authority and sovereignty, obedience, subjugation, reverence, piety, perversions of the natural order, insurrection, and willfulness.

Unpacking Reproductive Politics and Racialised Homophobia in Anti-gender Ideology

In their article “‘Leave the Kids Alone’: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Glorification of Reproductive Futurism in Anti-gender and Pro-family Movements in Italy”, Francesca Zanatta and Elisa Virgili analyse the anti-gender arguments for restricting reproductive rights in the name of the (white) child, the nuclear family, and the strong Italian

nation. Zanatta and Virgili sketch the conservative dream of the so-called natural family, tracing its roots in patriarchal, heteronormative and racist sentiments, and deconstructing the paradoxical position of the child – the child can only function as the beacon of futurity if it is an abstract projection surface with no history and no actual future, and if it is protected from the perils of modern life. In the Italian context we can clearly see the continuity between contemporary anti-genderist rhetoric on the generations of children lost to gender-mainstreaming, gender ideology and abortion, and the perceived threat of mass-immigration, and the degeneration theories so prevalent during the fin de siècle.

However, the longing for a uniform, pure and homogenous nation comes in more than one shape. Jenny Evang argues in her article, “Anti-gender Politics in *Queer Times*: ‘Genderismus’ and Norwegian Homonationalism”, that a Western European homo- and femonationalist rhetoric on anti-gender movements is parasitic upon the larger structure of racialised homophobia. Evang builds on recent influential work, such as that by Ester Kováts (2021), that shows how homophobia is projected onto Eastern Europe and Muslim populations and communities within countries that deem themselves progressive and liberal. Such projections build on longer historical genealogies, such as that of the idea that post-socialist countries and Muslim cultures are “lagging behind” when it comes to gender equality and LGBTQ rights. In the Norwegian context, and this is true of the Swedish context as well, anti-gender actors can also draw strength from the right-wing critique of the feminization of the Nordic states, expressed for example in the notion of feminist foreign politics, and hence tap into a nostalgic, conservative longing for a strong patriarch that can embody the integrity of the nation.

Maria Brock returns to the figuration of the child as the future in her *We’re Here*, titled “The Necropolitics of Russia’s Traditional Family Values”, and shows how it is used as a war mobilising device by Vladimir Putin in the ongoing war on Ukraine. Brock traces the anti-gender discourse behind the Russian federal law “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional

Family Values” and identifies the innocent child as a Trojan horse: it is the future but if it is not protected it will likely be corrupted and then pose a threat to the social order as whole. Putin’s reference to a Russian “healthy conservatism” is, Brock argues, framed as an alternative to the alleged perversity of the West, but also as a lesson learned from early socialist notions of sex and gender that were central to political ideologies in the Soviet Union.

In other words, the issue at hand explores the tension between the anti-gender description of the Western cultural sphere in general, and Europe in particular, as perched at the brink of a fatal health crisis, framing gender ideology as a contagious virus, the “Ebola from Brussels” (Korolczuk & Graff 2018), and attempts to resist and destabilise this rhetoric. It is our firm conviction that if we are to succeed in establishing a meaningful critique and hence shore up anti-gender rhetoric, we need to approach anti-gender rhetoric in its vastness and complexity and deconstruct its unholy and often counter-intuitive alliances; perhaps this is the best argument for studying *both* the specificity of contemporary anti-gender arguments, situated in their “translocal” (Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013) contexts, and the common historical baggage of these arguments. The figuration of gender ideology as contagious and potentially epidemical has its precursors in the vitriolic discourse of homosexuality as a cancer on society’s body of the 1930s and 1940s – following the argumentative line that homosexuality was not only a perversion but also a breeding ground for secrecy and corruption that hence threatened not only individual integrity but the democratic system as such – and can be discerned in contemporary discussions about how the increase in the number of youths seeking care for gender dysphoria is as a testament to gender dysphoria being a so-called culture diagnosis, socially contagious, not necessarily a “real” pathology, and hence something that children need to be protected from (see for example Pearce, Erikainen & Vincent 2020). Queer theory provides adequate tools to analyse the intellectual and political consequences of such assemblages of hate, fear and desire for power.

The review section contains reviews of two recent books of direct relevance to the themed issue. Maria Brock's review of Elzbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff's *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (Routledge 2022) identifies an opportunity for feminist discussions about democracy in a volume that provides a comprehensive reckoning with the affective aspects and processes of anti-gender ideology and urges readers to reappropriate a grounded critique of neoliberalism and the decline of the welfare state. In Astrid Helene Nielsen and Michael Nebeling Petersen's review of Catherine Jean Nash and Kath Browne's *Heteroactivism: Resisting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Rights and Equalities* (Zed 2020), the reviewers argue for the ways the book demonstrates useful ways to conceptualise and theorise anti-gender, homo- and transphobic politics and ideologies, as they travel globally and connect to diverse sets of reactionary sentiments in various locations.

This section concludes with a review of a recently completed doctoral dissertation. Fanny Ambjörnsson reviews Christine Bylund's *Anakrona livsvillkor. En studie av funktionalitet, möjligheter och begär i den föränderliga svenska välfärdsstaten* (2022), a dissertation that explores how the relation to the Swedish welfare state conditions dis/abled people's possibilities to dream about and sustain relations, family life and intimacy.

ERIKA ALM and
ELISABETH L. ENGBRETSSEN

REFERENCES

- Brim, Matt. 2020. *Poor queer studies: Confronting elitism in the university*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Case, Mary Anne. 2019. Trans Formations in the Vatican's War on 'Gender Ideology'. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 44 (3): 639–664. doi:10.1086/701498
- Dahl, Ulrika. 2021. Nordic academic feminism and whiteness as epistemic habit. In: *Feminisms in the Nordic Region: Neoliberalism, nationalism and decolonial critique*, edited by Suvi Keskinen and Diana Mulinari (113–133). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-53464-6_6
- Demker, Marie & Erika Alm. 2022. Universitetens lider inte av någon "cancelkultur". *Göteborgs-posten*, November 14. <https://www.gp.se/kultur/kultur/universitetens-lider-inte-av-n%C3%A5gon-cancelkultur-1.8528672>
- Engebreetsen, Elisabeth L. 2022. Scientizing gender? An examination of anti-gender campaigns on social media, Norway. In: *Populism and Science in Europe*, edited by Hande Eslen-Ziya & Alberta Giorgi (185–206). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-97535-7_9
- Ergas, Yasmine, Jazgul Kochkorova, Andrea Pető & Natalia Trujillo. 2022. Disputing "gender" in academia: Illiberalism and the politics of knowledge. *Politics and Governance* 10(4): 121–131. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5529>
- Graff, Agnieszka & Elżbieta Korolczuk. 2022. *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/50542>
- Greiner, Clemens & Patrick Sakdapolrak. 2013. Translocality. Concepts, applications and emerging research perspectives. *Geography Compass* 7(5): 373–384.
- Kováts, Eszter. 2016. The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy. In: *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, edited by Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan & Andrea Pető (175–189). Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kováts, Eszter. 2020. Post-Socialist Conditions and the Orbán Government's Gender Politics between 2010 and 2019 in Hungary. In: *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond*, edited by Gabriele Dietze & Julia Roth (75–99). Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Kováts, Eszter. 2021. Anti-gender politics in East-Central Europe: Right-wing defiance to West-Eurocentrism. *GENDER Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft* 2021(1): 76–90.
- Korolczuk, Elżbieta & Agnieszka Graff. 2018. Gender as "Ebola from Brussels": The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43(4), 797–821.
- Lascó, Ferenc & Eszter Kováts. 2022. What does right-wing anti-gender mobilization have to do with progressive gender trends? Eszter Kováts investigates the politics of

- Fidesz and AFD. *Review of Democracy*, Central European University, September 17. <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2022/09/17/what-does-right-wing-anti-gender-mobilization-have-to-do-with-progressive-gender-trends-eszter-kovats-investigates-the-politics-of-fidesz-and-afd/>
- Lilleslåtten, Mari. 2018. European gender scholars unite in resistance against right-wing attacks. *Kilden* <https://kjonnsforskning.no/en/2018/11/european-gender-scholars-unite> (accessed November 17, 2022)
- Magubane, Zine. 2001. Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the “Hottentot Venus.” *Gender & Society*, 15(6), 816–834. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124301015006003>
- Pető, Andrea. 2021. Current comment: The illiberal academic authority: An oxymoron? *Berichte Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 44: 461–469. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bewi.202100013>
- Pető, Andrea. 2021. Feminist Stories from an Illiberal State: Revoking the License to Teach Gender Studies in Hungary at a University in Exile (CEU). In: *Gender and Power in Eastern Europe: Changing Concepts of Femininity and Masculinity in Power Relations* edited by Katharina Bluhm et al., (35–44). Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Pearce, Ruth, Sonja Erikainen & Ben Vincent. 2020. TERF wars. An introduction. *Sociological Review* 68(4): 677–698. doi:10.1177/0038026120934713.
- Stork, Hanne Skogvang. 2022. “Andrea Pető: Working within higher education has become high-risk”. *Kilden* (September 29) <https://kjonnsforskning.no/en/2022/09/andrea-peto-working-within-higher-education-has-become-high-risk>
- Verloo, Mieke & David Paternotte. 2018. The feminist project under threat in Europe. *Politics and Governance* 6(3): 1–5. <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/1736/1736>