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Can gender studies be in exile? An introduction

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According to Albert O. Hirschman's classic study *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970), exile can be interpreted as an exit of individuals from their (political) community: they leave a 'system – a family, an organization, a nation-state – that is experienced as declining, disappointing or dysfunctional beyond repair' (Heins, 2020, p. 44). Faced with such deteriorating circumstances, one can either voice discontent and attempt to change the situation by 'various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion' (Hirschman, 1970, p. 30), or one can decide to leave. Emigration might become preferable when feelings of loyalty and belonging are eroded by states that continuously betray and silence their own citizens (Heins, 2020). It can become a matter of survival, if oppression turns into persecution or worse. Hirschman's analytical approach remains useful for exile and diaspora studies, but it does not address other exit options such as inner emigration and internal exile. The latter can be described 'as a form of social limitation and immobility – from short term to life – within [...] not only sites of official dislocations [such as a prison camp or asylum, but] supposedly benign institutions such as the familial home, and social conditions such as enforced or prolonged unemployment, may also function as sites of exile' (Allatson & McCormack, 2008, p. 11).

Across the globe, a substantial number of gender studies scholars left their country of origin not because of promising career options in a globalized academic job market, but because different levels of dysfunctionality in their home country pushed them towards emigration, caused by political conflicts or war, academic restructuring, precariousness, or lack of resources. Others were driven into internal exile, especially in 'totalitarian, dictatorial or simply ideologically unpalatable regimes' (Allatson & McCormack, 2008, p. 11). This thematic issue focuses on gender studies scholars and the field of gender studies more generally in the context of broader struggles against the rise of right-wing authoritarian nationalist movements and democratic backsliding across the globe (see, e.g., Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Bermeo, 2019). What are the prospects for gender studies under such circumstances? The time seems ripe for assessing how notions of exile rhyme with gender studies.

Right-wing populist movements feed on popular resentment of the effects of neoliberal globalization, while at the same time empowering authoritarian rulers who enact similar

sets of economic policies (privatization of infrastructure, deregulation of markets, low taxes etc.). Numerous scholars refer to conceptual and structural links, rather than a conflictual and dichotomous relationship, between neoliberalism and authoritarianism (e.g., Konings, 2012; Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Biebricher, 2020; Lendvai-Bainton & Szelewa, 2021; Scheiring, 2021; Szombati, 2021). Part of the allure of authoritarian right-wing populisms is a culture war rhetoric that vilifies ‘globalist elites’ for their alleged agenda of destroying remaining vestiges of ‘*communitas*’ like the family, the religious community, the nation, and cultural values associated with them (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rogenhofer & Panievsky, 2020; Stewart, 2020; Schäfer, 2022). Concerning the academic sphere, right-wing culture warriors zoom in on those fields that have originally emerged as critical inquiries of racialized and gendered hierarchies in society and politics, most notably the fields of critical whiteness studies (Hunter & van der Westhuizen, 2022) and gender studies (Zaborskis, 2018).¹ This creates additional challenges for academic disciplines that are generally characterized by a relatively low degree of institutionalization and funding, as compared to ones with a long history of institutionalization.² Is gender studies as a field of inquiry therefore at risk of being pushed into exile, and if so, in what sense?

In neoliberal academia, the logic of marketization and competition results in contradictory patterns of inclusion, visibility and promotion on the one hand, and exclusion and marginalization on the other. Neoliberal politics of knowledge production and circulation are complicit in reproducing entrenched power relations and inequalities in academia, and this becomes evident when considered through a gender and sexuality lens in their intersection with other categories such as class, age, ethnic background and physical/mental abilities. However, in order to develop effective counter strategies, it is important to avoid obscuring the differences between neoliberalism and right-wing authoritarianism: while gender studies as an academic discipline is promoted or at least tolerated as part of a more or less inclusive liberal agenda, it has come under attack by right-wing populist forces resenting this agenda. Attacks on gender studies can be seen as part of a wider backlash against hard fought advances in the sphere of women’s rights, including abortion and reproductive rights as well as LGBTIQ rights (Graff, 2014; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Rohde et al., 2018; Dietze & Roth, 2020; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Möser et al., 2022; Santos, 2022).

In the context of post-truth populism, Raewyn Connell describes recuperative masculinity politics as a key element of re-imagined authoritarian nationalism, often cloaked in a rhetoric of family protection, where ‘the right-wing leader becomes a symbolic protector for those who are fearful of further change, whether towards gender justice, ethnic pluralism or economic equality’ (Connell, 2022, pp. 70–71). Connell calls for a broader engagement with feminist knowledge production, the central achievement of which ‘over centuries and continents, has been to contest Big Lies’, i.e., ‘the core stories of patriarchal ideology that defined

¹ See also Kóczé’s (2022) compelling observations on the ‘abnormalization’ of social justice in the context of anti-woke culture wars.

² See, for example, Engeli’s account on the institutionalization of gender and sexuality research in the context of political science: ‘One tale of gender and sexuality research is clearly about the way it has become institutionalized, both within the discipline and within the contemporary university. Yet, a second tale has also emerged, which is the story by which gender and sexuality research has become contested, attacked and elevated to the status of the *bête noire* of the populist and radical right’ (Engeli, 2020, p. 227).

women as deficient in intelligence, morality, creativity, loyalty, public-spiritedness or any other capacity that defined human worth' (Connell, 2022, p. 71). This is especially urgent as authoritarian nationalist movements are in the process of building new patriarchies, leading to 'more insecurity and a pervasive corruption of culture' (Connell, 2022, p. 75). Even though authoritarian nationalist leaders often pledge to restore and protect tradition (the family, the nation, etc.), their rhetoric hides the broader and more far-reaching implications of these new patriarchal arrangements. Thus, attacks on gender studies, as David Paternotte observes,

should not be understood primarily as a form of backlash against gender equality and sexual freedom, the return of patriarchy, or the result of toxic masculinity. While they are undoubtedly gendered, these assaults are embedded in wider campaigns against democracy in Europe today. Gender studies serve therefore as a proxy, and these attacks should be seen as a key step in the dismantling of critical knowledge more broadly. (Paternotte, 2019)

Indeed, attacks on gender studies by right-wing populist movements and/or regimes form part and parcel of a sustained attack on academic freedom and critical scholarship. Writing about recent science policy developments in Hungary and elsewhere, Andrea Pető explains how key features of illiberal polypore states – such as the establishment of parallel institutions, the ideology of familism, and the securitization discourse (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018) – contribute to masking political authority as academic authority. This process leaves no space for independent and free thinking and eventually leaves 'only hollow copies of academic institutions' (Pető, 2022, p. 40). Stirring genderphobia, defined as 'an ideology about the fearfulness of gender as well as the action of fear-mongering for political effect,' is a tool to whip up 'aversion to disrupting dominant gender and sexual hierarchies, by addressing and critically interrogating gendered differences and gender as a social construct' (Takács et al., 2022, p. 38). Key elements in the process of institutionalizing genderphobia in Hungary included stripping LGBTIQ individuals and families of their rights, the implementation of restrictive 'child protection' policies aimed at framing LGBTIQ people as sexual predators, and the banning of gender studies.³

It is therefore no coincidence that we publish this thematic issue on 'Gender Studies in Exile' in a Hungarian journal, in a country that offers a showcase scenario for right-wing authoritarian identity politics. Hungary arguably evolved in recent years from a form of 'illiberal democracy' to an 'elected dictatorship', after having 'neutered the courts, taken over much of the media, and mounted a sustained attack on free speech' (Mounk, 2020, p. 31, see also Bogaards, 2018). Indeed, the call for submissions to this thematic issue has drawn some unwanted attention from Hungarian media outlets that can be described as having close ties

³ In 2018 the Hungarian government led by Viktor Orbán withdrew the academic accreditation of gender studies programmes in universities (funding for gender studies has been withdrawn only at the Eötvös Loránd University, since the Central European University, the other university affected by this policy change is a private institution, receiving no funding from the government), and instead set up family studies programmes at other universities that seem more closely aligned with the Orbán-regime's ideological premises. According to their explanation, the 'government's standpoint is that people are born either male or female, and we do not consider it acceptable for us to talk about socially constructed genders rather than biological sexes' (Oppenheim, 2018 – for more media reports see, for example, Redden, 2018; Verseck, 2018; Apperly, 2019; Gimson, 2019). For more details see also an interview conducted in 2018 with Anikó Gregor, the key faculty member in charge of the Gender Studies master programme at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest: <https://lefteast.org/gender-studies-in-hungary/> (accessed 18 November 2022); in 2019 Gregor received an Academy in Exile scholarship and spent a year as a visiting scholar at the Freie Universität Berlin.

to the governing Fidesz party, denouncing the endeavour as radical left-wing propaganda lacking academic merit.⁴ We are therefore proud to be able to present a selection of well-researched original studies in this issue of *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* despite the prevailing political climate in Hungary, and we salute the editors of the journal for their steadfastness in defending academic freedom.

The guest editors of this thematic issue have been affiliated with *Academy in Exile*, a consortium of academic institutions in Germany that operates a fellowship programme for scholars at risk from across the world.⁵ This academic community includes colleagues whose career and/or personal wellbeing are manifestly threatened as well as those who represent fields of knowledge-production that are being delegitimized and/or marginalized in their home countries, like gender studies in Hungary and elsewhere (Özbek, 2021). In presenting six excellent articles that address related questions in some of these countries, authored mostly by younger gender studies scholars and/or by researchers who write from a position of exile, this thematic issue sends a message of solidarity to colleagues in these fields who continue their work even under adverse circumstances, in their home country or in exile.

Several articles in this thematic issue are valuable contributions to the buzzing field of diaspora studies (Cohen & Fischer, 2019). Some seem to echo *Exilforschung*, an interdisciplinary field of study focusing on Germans and Austrians forced into exile following the rise of Nazism and the effects of this mass emigration until today. As the contributions to this thematic issue and other works amply testify, experiences of exile and diaspora formations are not devoid of gender dimensions (see, for example, Campt & Thomas, 2008; Brinson & Hammel, 2016; Brinson et al., 2017; Féron, 2021). The notion of exile is central to our collective endeavour in several ways. In the literal sense, the experience of exile is addressed and/or has inspired the contributions dealing with Belarus/the United States, Finland, Mongolia and Turkey/Germany. Articles focussing on gender studies scholars working under challenging conditions in Austria and Slovakia address the notion of inner exile. In presenting an array of studies addressing marginalized and under-researched topics, in part discussing developments in countries of the global (semi-)periphery, this thematic issue opens a door for their metaphorical return from exile.

The articles demonstrate numerous entanglements also between scholarship and politics, and all of them discuss cases in which intersectionality of gender, class, and ethnicity is a crucial factor. Some authors address specific experiences and coping strategies of individuals/groups embodying marginal and/or non-normative gendered and sexual positionalities, either within their home country or in exile. Gender is not always in the centre of the re-

⁴ For the call for submissions, see <https://intersections.tk.mta.hu/index.php/intersections/announcement/view/33>. See also the articles on 'Publicly funded gender propaganda is carried out in a journal connected to the Eötvös Loránd Research Network' published on 2 October 2021 in *Magyar Nemzet*, the biggest self-proclaimed pro-government national daily newspaper (<https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2021/10/az-eotvos-lorand-kutatasi-halozathoz-kothetofolyoiratban-kozpenzbol-folytatnak-genderpropagandat>), and 'Publicly funded gender propaganda is carried out in a journal connected to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences', published on 29 September 2021 in *Origo*, one of the biggest pro-government online news portals (<https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20210929-kozpenzen-folytatnak-genderpropagandat-az-mta-hoz-kapcsolodo-folyoiratban.html> (accessed 18 November 2022)).

⁵ *Academy in Exile* (AiE) was founded in 2017 as a joint initiative of the Institute for Turkish Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen, the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI) Essen and the Forum Transregionale Studien Berlin. In 2018 the Freie Universität Berlin also joined the AiE. For more details, see, <https://www.academy-in-exile.eu/>

search question, but always plays a crucial role in the analysis. Others inquire into the state of the art and working conditions in the field of gender studies in selected countries. Several articles explicitly address emotions like anxieties and shame. These are negative feelings that reflect partly traumatic experiences of authors and/or the social groups introduced in the texts. In discussing individual coping strategies with or responses to difficult experiences, several contributions point to silence and withdrawal into inner exile. In order to transform such emotions and experiences into a source of self-empowerment, it is important to break silences surrounding such issues by turning them into a topic for research. As a consequence, the studies assembled in this thematic issue differ from more emotionally and personally detached scholarship, which is sometimes mistaken as evidence for 'objectivity', obscuring the fact that all knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1988). In terms of methodology and disciplinary orientation, they fall into the categories of qualitative social sciences, social anthropology and cultural studies research, and often constitute examples of politically engaged auto-ethnography (Anderson, 2006; Denshire, 2014).

Ali Ali's article on 'Warming up narratives of community: Queer kinship and emotional exile,' based on ethnographic fieldwork in gender-political communities in Helsinki, tackles questions of queer belonging. Rather than focusing on specific national backgrounds, the article conceptualizes the ongoing collective living and communality at work in constructing and deconstructing narratives of belonging. The author argues that the precarity of queer racialized exiles entails a strategic and at times complacent investment in norms of racialized othering. At the same time, Ali also shows how the realm of (queer) precarity simultaneously enables a (re)consideration and contestation of the terms of belonging in a European society.

Tatsiana Shchurko's piece, 'From Belarus to Black Lives Matter: Rethinking protests in Belarus through a transnational feminist perspective' draws on the author's experience of exile in the United States to engage in a comparative discussion of the Black Lives Matter protests and the anti-authoritarian uprising in Belarus in 2020. Seeking to explore the potential for practices of transnational feminist solidarity, Shchurko argues that building global feminist alliances must start by critically interrogating these networks to see how power operates in asymmetrical and multidirectional ways, and sometimes inhibits effective alliances and meaningful communication.

Refiye Nevra Akdemir's article on 'Making distance from our displacement: A cross-section of the academic life of displaced scholars from Turkey working on displacement in Germany' combines critical inquiries of both authoritarian and neoliberal regimes and their marginalizing effects on the sizable community of Turkish exiled scholars in Germany. By interrogating the different ways in which exiled researchers who have migrated from the field of uncertainty, created by a national authoritarian regime, to the field of precariousness, created by extensive marketization, the author addresses the issue of interpreting displacement in these two different fields of uncertainty.

Otgonbaatar Tsendemberel's article on 'Shamed citizens: Exilic lived experiences of queer Mongolians abroad' discusses the gap between Mongolia's progressive LGBTQ related laws and their lack of implementation in a conservative homophobic society. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews, the author explores the lived experiences of repressed Mongolian queers and their exilic experiences abroad. Tsendemberel shows that feelings of shame often motivate their forced and self-imposed retreat into exile. The article

argues that despite the hardships of exilic existence, it can enable a transformation of the feelings of shame into self-acceptance and self-esteem.

Veronika Valkovičová and Zuzana Maďarová in their article on ‘Care as symbolic exile: The diversity work of Slovak gender studies scholars’ examine gender studies as an epistemic community and aim to enrich the existing body of scholarship in this field by focusing on Slovakia, a country with a weak level of institutionalization of gender studies. The presented qualitative study draws on focus group discussions and interviews with PhD students and early career scholars of social sciences in Slovakia. The authors argue that a combination of the fragmented gender-oriented epistemic communities, and the neoliberalized academia pushing for competitiveness often lead junior gender studies scholars to either self-imposed or forced inner exile within their institutions.

In their article ‘Feminist activism in Austria – and its way to escape a spiral of silencing and inner exile’ Regine Bendl, Maria Clar, and Angelika Schmidt discuss ways in which right-wing culture war rhetoric has influenced scholarly work and teaching of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) topics in Austria. Their study, presenting findings from a participatory action research project, demonstrates that safe spaces can enable reflections on ways to overcome the loss of previous EDI supporters and a newly inflamed gender equality opposition, and they can also help to escape the spiral of silence and inner exile.

Rita Béres-Deák’s book review of the recent edited volume, *Paradoxical right-wing sexual politics in Europe* (Möser et al., 2022), complements this collection of articles.

Finally, we should return to the initial question that motivated us to produce this thematic issue: Can gender studies as an academic field be pushed into exile, and if so, in what sense? On the one hand, in view of the banning of gender studies programmes in Hungary since 2018, we can perhaps answer with agreement. On the other hand, we can refer to unsuccessful attempts at closing gender studies programmes in other countries, as happened in Romania in 2020 (see, for example, Barberá, 2020). We should also note the resilience of the field, at least for the time being. While it is true that students have not been able to enrol in gender studies programmes at Hungarian universities since 2018, gender studies as a field of academic inquiry has resisted being silenced in Hungary, and this thematic issue is meant to contribute to its continued vitality.

At the same time, there is no ignoring the fact that there are powerful political attempts to challenge the social and policy relevance of gender and to reinstate unreconstructed notions of biological sex and/or the supposed natural character of the heteronormative family (Butler, 2021). Attempts to denounce gender as a relevant analytical category and to placate gender activism as infringement of the freedom of expression can be observed also within academia.⁶

We can argue that at least in certain parts of the world, it is gender itself that is increasingly denied a place in social reality and in the analytical toolkit of social sciences. In this sense, we can state that gender as an analytical tool and thus gender studies as an academic discipline can be, indeed, in exile.

⁶ For a critical account of recent Hungarian developments, see, for example, Barát (2022). In Germany, denunciations of gender activism as authoritarian practices are voiced by anti-woke scholars affiliated, for instance, with the *Netzwerk Wissenschaftsfreiheit*, <https://www.netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit.de/>.

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