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Blame it on the ‘Gender Ideology’

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Introduction

“Donald Trump and the Alternative for Germany” – reading this seminar title brought up a lot of emotions for me: disgust, refusal, and even shame, because being a native German with Greek roots, I have incorporated a deep sadness and guilt over Nazism in Germany. Nonetheless, unlike some of the members of the above-mentioned party, I do not feel like it is time to “move on” and stop engaging with the terrible, destructive history of Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. The reason why I bring this up is because I think it is essential for the way I engaged with this seminar and why I chose to attend it in the first place.

At the beginning of this year I was having a discussion about the European Union with a friend of mine who grew up in the United States. He said that Germany was “running” the EU, a statement that made me flinch almost instantly. The thought of Germany running anything made me utterly uncomfortable. I simply cannot bear the idea of a country with increasingly successful right-wing parties being more or less in power over many others, because it sounds very familiar. Even though I know he was more or less talking about financial matters, money is a powerful source to undermine others as well.

Regarding Donald Trump, I have strong negative emotions as probably most women who do not like being “grabbed”. As I attended a class a year ago about Trump and the cultural politics of his presidency, I am quite familiar with the way he uses rhetoric and I do not actually think that he is as stupid as the media often depict him. I am convinced that he is a very clever businessman in an era of capitalism, and that is exactly the way he runs his office: he chooses what is fashionable in politics for a great amount of people right now who are dissatisfied with a more pluralistic and complex society.

In this reading journal I want to focus on the sessions that interested me the most and from which I gained the most for my further engagement with this topic. Nonetheless, the overall seminar was interesting to attend and provided me with a lot of new perspectives and approaches as we will see in the upcoming sections.

Classes

Class 1, April 17: “The poor white woman in the clutches of Middle Eastern men”

Our first session did not start off mildly. We dove right into a deeply problematic poster by the AfD which was used for the European elections. In order to investigate the problematic nature of this poster, we discussed it on two levels. First, we talked about the visual elements. The poster features a painting in which we can see men of color in long robes. In the center is a white, naked woman in whose mouth we see one of the men’s fingers, clearly a phallic innuendo. On a short side note, I believe it is interesting that the painter illustrated this woman with a complete lack of body hair – apart from her head – which, to my knowledge, is a more recent trend than the 1860s. But with the hairless body that imitates a child’s one, it also contributes to the intended subjection of the woman. Lastly, it underlines my impression that this painting represents the painter’s wishful thinking and subjective perception of the world.



Directly from the visuals we were able to conclude that this is clearly a gendered and more importantly, racist, oversimplified, but common depiction of the Middle East. The white woman is depicted as a passive victim, completely at the mercy of the slave traders. Secondly, the language that is used on the poster should not be disregarded. Loosely translated it says: “So that Europe will not turn into ‘Eurabia’!” On the top of the poster it is mentioned that this specific poster is part of a series by the party that is called: “Learning from Europe’s history.” The

fact that this poster completely neglects Europe's own history of colonialism and slave trade is without question. Moreover, it further supports the fear of a creeping 'islamisation of the Western world' which has played a big part in right-wing rhetoric in the last couple of years.

Furthermore, we discussed the term 'gender nostalgia' and why it is important for our investigation of the politics of gender in our class. This term, which can also be called re-gendering is the wish for going back to a clear binary between men and women. That this state was mostly beneficial for heterosexual, white males is often criticized, but is often belittled by many people in return (often men, but also women) who do not sympathize with people who defy traditional gender norms in whatever way they like to. A great example for this that came to my mind during this class was a scene from 20th Century Fox' series *Modern Family* in which one of the main characters, Jay Pritchett, a heterosexual, white man in his sixties, has a conversation with his about 25-year-younger Latina wife, Gloria, and reminisces about a group of male friends he used to hang out with when he was young:

Jay: "I'm gonna meet a bunch of guys I played high school football with. Man, those were the good old days."

Gloria: "Yeah, unless you were a woman, Black, Hispanic or gay."

Jay: "True. But if you were a straight white guy who played football, you really couldn't have a bad day." (S03E21: 00:03:20-00:03:29)

What this quote nicely sums up in my opinion is the fact that as long as you live and adhere to the societal standard of what is regarded as 'normal', life is easy for you. The phrase "those were the good old days" evokes nostalgia for a time in which everything was supposedly simple and everybody knew their place in society, which is a statement that is often made by right-wing supporters. In addition, I also spot the lack of a real concern for the struggles of less privileged people in society in the way that Jay quickly bypasses Gloria's comment. I am aware that this is of course an oversimplification of a very difficult topic, but it shall just be a quick example to illustrate my point.

Class 2, April 24: Remedies for Fragile Masculinity – Cernovich Edition

Whatever you might think about Mike Cernovich, you have to admit that he is brilliant in presenting his content. Part of Mike Cernovich's appeal is his average look. He looks like the guy next door, which makes him relatable to almost anybody. Even more so, the way he presents his view of Western society and masculinity makes it easy to believe that he is right and got the world figured out, as he does not deliver any evidence for his observations, but mostly personal anecdotes and broad statements that are probably relatable to a great number of people. Furthermore, in between he talks about getting back to your roots, connecting with nature which does not sound offensive at all, but appears as a literal down-to-earth guy who is concerned about your mental well-being.

This impression changes quickly though when he talks about the status quo regarding masculinity. According to Cernovich, Eastern Europe still seems to have some of the conservative mindsets and values that need to be perpetuated as opposed to Western Europe and the U.S. which are "feminized" (Cernovich 2017: 00:02:14-00:02:18). Apart from this oversimplification of different regions of the world, I regard two aspects of his statement as utterly important: firstly, everything that does not cohere with Cernovich's traditional views of masculinity is "feminized" and, secondly, everything that is associated with the 'feminine' is bad, weak, and subordinate (cf. Olson 2019: 14).

Interestingly, he uses the term "castrated" (Cernovich 2017: 00:02:51) to describe the way in which men interact in the world, which immediately reminded me of Sigmund Freud. The fear of being castrated, in this context, because a man who is offended does not immediately start a physical fight, seems ludicrous to me. Nevertheless, he seems to hit a nerve with many people if you look at the comment sections of his videos consisting of male viewers virtually patting each other on the back for their rediscovered masculinity and brotherhood (cf. Olson 2019: 16).

All in all, watching "10 Ways to Reclaim Masculinity" confuses me in the same way that heterosexual pride marches do: why does an already privileged part of our society whose common identity is constantly rewarded, in terms of status and money, need even more praise and appreciation?

Class 3, May 8: Why do they even care about gender?

The AfD is widely known for their anti-immigration positions. So why did they suddenly include politics of gender in their program? As Juliane Lang puts it, they are trying to get access to broader political debates that do not simply focus on xenophobia:

Die Polemik gegen ‚Gender‘ dient der extremen Rechten also nicht nur zur Mobilisierung in den eigenen Reihen. Sie strebt den Schulterschluss mit anderen Akteuren an indem sie versucht, Begriffe wie ‚Genderwahn‘ oder ‚Gender-Terror‘ in öffentlichen Debatten als Kampfbegriffe mit eigener Agenda zu verankern. (Lang 2017: n. pag.)

In that sense, the AfD is trying to ‘convert’ other groups of society into their ranks. This strategy is also prevalent in the USA as more and more conservative groups with a Christian or other religious background join right-wing parties. To my mind, this can be seen as political opportunism, even though I am sure that some of the party members are probably convinced that ‘gender ideology’ is a threat to our society.

Furthermore, she quotes Karlheinz Weißmann, who stated that the one who coins and defines a term, makes its usage possible and therefore influences the way it is perceived (Weißmann 2010). According to Lang this is exactly what happened with terms like ‘gender ideology’ or ‘Genderismus’ in Germany. The neutral meaning of the term ‘gender’ is stripped away and replaced with a supposedly threatening one. The reason why this redefinition was possible is the fact that although gender had existed as a concept and term already in the 1990s, but was not known to the wider public (Lang 2017: n. pag.).

Additionally, right-wing tendencies are undeniable when ‘gender ideology’ is directly addressed, as is distinct in the use of Nazi-vocabulary. Back in 2008 a woman of the organization *Ring Nationaler Frauen* used the term ‘Gleichschaltung’ (ibid.) – i.e. ‘forcible-coordination’ – which had been a core principle of Nazi politics in Germany, to describe the way ‘gender ideology’ operates in her opinion.

Class 6, May 29: What are the causes for anti-gender politics?

According to Duncan Hosie, “American conservative leaders are increasingly incorporating the rhetoric and tactics of the international far right into their discourse and doctrine” (Hosie 2019: n.pag.). I would argue that especially for someone who is as opportunistic as Donald Trump, it is mostly a scheme. Conservative leaders realize that their politics are not ‘traditional’ and reactionary enough in comparison to right-wing parties. This was observable in German politics as well when the CSU started demanding stricter rules for immigration in the last couple of years, but even further after violent attacks in Chemnitz in 2018. Horst Seehofer, who was the party’s chair during that time called immigration the “Mutter aller politischen Probleme” (Woratschka 2018: n. pag.), and the former President of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Hans-Georg Maaßen, belittled the gravity of attacks in Chemnitz. This shows us that tendencies to the far right are among our political systems as well, as they are popular and deal with the concerns a great part of society has. That most of these concerns are probably not justified is anyone’s guess for now.

Hosie tries to provide an explanation for the successful demonization of ‘gender ideology’ in current right-wing discourse and politics:

By simplifying myriad issues into one frame and integrating it into a larger crusade against elites, “gender ideology” offers an accessible means of expression for people who feel alienated by the pace of Western cultural change and current economic conditions. (Hosie 2019: n.pag.)

This shows that “gender ideology” is used as a scapegoat for the dubious politics of the last decade, especially in prioritizing elites, the exact ones of which people like Donald Trump are part of. Of course, this is all quite contradictory, but as we are talking about an era of affective and ‘postfactual’ politics, I would argue that this is how these contradictions can come to live and not be questioned.

One of the favorite topics of anti-LGBTQ+ activists is the ‘unnecessity of political correctness’. I have to admit that I admire the efforts in official German institutions to only use gender-neutral language, but I feel that due to the structure of the German language it overcomplicates communication in terms of sometimes very long words, as in opposition to English in which the replacement of a “he”

with “they” only requires two additional letters. Be that as it may, I certainly believe that we should try to improve our state of language so that less people feel offended, mis- or underrepresented.

The interesting thing is that instead of seeing equality for what it is – equality of everyone – it is instead seen by many people as the means to take away a finite allocation of possibilities and opportunities and that once this is in order, the current ‘roles’ in society will be reversed. In that case, everybody who says they are not privileged when they actually are, are kind of hypocritical because they actively deny other people who are less privileged the opportunities they have.

Class 11/12, July 3/10: MA reports

To my mind, one of the most interesting aspects about Anna Lena’s thesis about queer beauty YouTubers is to think about the ways in which they have transformed their gender performance into a lucrative business (e.g. cosmetics, fashion etc.). As queer influencers they represent parts of a dynamic in our society that I see more and more in diverse areas of culture. An idea or movement that was originally part of a marginalized culture or counterculture against patriarchy or capitalism, can, in our society, incorporate this exact culture into pop culture and eventually turn it into capital. A great example for this were numerous fashion brands that sold rainbow-colored or pro-queer phrases on their clothing, accessories etc. during Pride Month and even though I am sure that some brands probably take action against LGBTQ+ discrimination and support them via different actions, I am equally sure that it is just a decision based on profit for many businesses.

When Viktoria presented her thesis on “Women Leaders in German and US American Business Publications”, I was intrigued. Especially in the part about why she chose Tory Burch for her analysis and that Burch was apparently often criticized for not having made her fortune on her own but was rather financed by her wealthy parents and ex-husband, Trump came to mind. Even though Trump is no from-rags-to-riches-self-made-millionaire, he often portrays himself in that way and even gets credit for it. Apparently when a woman has the same financial advantages to begin with, it is used as a ground for criticism. Although I am not as familiar with the

topic as Viktoria probably is, there seems to be low-key misogyny in financial journalism as well.

Another important piece of advice was Professor Olson's remark on making clear statements about why your research is relevant and why a specific text or data was chosen in the first place. To be honest, in the past I did not think a lot about the relevance of my research but wrote term papers simply because I had to in most cases. The next time I am writing a paper I want to focus more on the why before I start engaging with the respective topic in detail.

Even though I am not ready to write my thesis yet, I could relate to Alaa's excitement about *Breaking Bad*, but appreciated the feedback Professor Olson gave on taking a few steps back from the dominant reading of the show in order to be more critical of it and also regarding one's own emotions and thoughts towards it. As I might use one of my favorite TV shows for my thesis next year, I hope to avoid being too passionate about my subject matter.

I really enjoyed the sessions in which we discussed thesis reports. Seeing the diverse topics that different students come up with is interesting and inspires me to not choose the most obvious topic at hand, but to explore more possibilities and choose something I really care about. Additionally, I find the feedback we give helpful, because our class makes supportive and productive remarks from which I can learn a couple of things as well. I realised, for example, that I tend to generalize certain statements in my papers, but if I want to do thorough and professional research this is something I need to work on.

Class 13, July 17: What can we do?

As a somewhat privileged white woman who comes from an academic and financially stable home, I live inside my own filter bubble. When I use social media platforms like Instagram or Facebook, it often seems as if we live in a quite diverse and accepting world that I am sometimes confused that this is not the case for everybody. After a while I understood that this is because of the carefully curated feed I have on my social media apps. If I find an account or their statements problematic, I will probably unfollow them and instead follow accounts that convey

an inclusive message, for example body-positive and (queer-)feminist accounts. Unfortunately, I sometimes forget what little portion of the world this represents.

However, as much as I would stress each individual's responsibility to stand up against discrimination for themselves and others, I cannot help but feel that politics do not do a satisfying job in preventing and stopping gender discrimination. To my mind, this holds true even more for online discourse. Therefore, I strongly hope that future laws will regulate online vitriol in an appropriate manner.

Over the course of the semester I feel as if the whole class realized that the current gender politics that is propagated by right-wing associates is deeply problematic. In conversations with friends we might not want to start a fight over a discriminatory comment, even though we feel it is deeply unfair. This is why this particular session seemed essential to all participants since we often feel powerless against discrimination of others, but also afraid of becoming an outsider ourselves by standing up when something does not feel right as it turned out in the discussion.

We then collected some ideas about how to tackle this issue. First, it is important to believe that what each of us is saying is important and deserves to be heard. Other people might say I am being too sensitive, but honestly, others do not draw the line when something is offensive to me, only I can do that. Secondly, getting informed about what parties are truly trying to achieve is essential. Just like any other advertisement, parties will try to persuade you into buying their ideas. In order to find out if that is something you want to support or not, you need to get informed. Election posters are often extremely superficial, as they mostly feature a somewhat trustworthy-looking smiling politician with a phrase such as "For our children". It is truly important to not be persuaded by something so simple. These posters are trying to achieve an affective response in voters; who would be against children? Ergo it must be a good party or politician? No, that is like writing a term paper and not providing evidence, which is why research is key. I personally liked the election posters the German Pirate Party put up in Giessen a couple of years ago that read "Don't trust a poster – get informed!" in German. I liked this campaign a lot as it seemed genuine and quite self-reflexive about how politics and elections mostly work on an affective level nowadays.

Thirdly, do not be afraid to personalize the issue. If someone throws statements about women's or queers' place in society around, it is probably hard to

get to an honest and fruitful conversation. Asking them about how they would feel if their daughter/sister/wife was marginalized or otherwise treated badly because of their gender, you might be able to make them see reason.

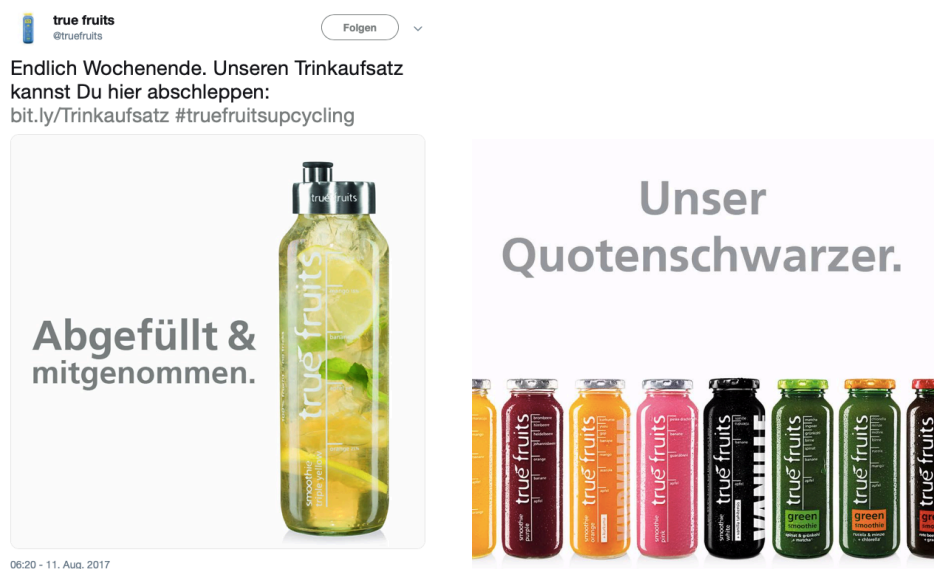
One of the most important aspects in my opinion is the realization that it is not men who are all to blame. As we have discussed hegemonic masculinity in previous classes, women play their fair part in upholding patriarchal structures. Therefore, it is important to also reflect on one's own behavior as someone identifying as a woman. A good example for this is when women police other women regarding their sex life and then use slurs like 'slut'. In this case, women reproduce the stereotype of a sexually active woman as a bad woman, because they have been indoctrinated to believe it.

Last, but not least, avoidance of a moral highground in conversations is utterly important. If your opposite feels (again: affective responses are also important in private settings) like they are being taught a lesson or their opinion or intelligence is undermined, a fruitful conversation is not going to happen. This is much easier when talking to others face-to-face rather than leading heated debates that rarely end peaceful, but sadly more and more in death or rape threats. We all have been socialized in different ways and might have been influenced badly in different areas of our lives. It is great when we are trying to defy discrimination because of gender or other reasons, but we should never forget that we are not totally free of prejudice ourselves, thus we need to keep in mind that there is always room for improvement, for others and ourselves.

Conclusion

During the class I was once again confronted with the dilemma of reclaiming different types of rhetoric. Language is a powerful tool and while it can be used to hurt others, it can also be used to empower and uplift them. Thus, reclamation might be a liberating practice as in the use of the word Black, but in other cases it might reinforce the structures it is trying to subvert as it is with terms like 'slut' and 'bitch' in my opinion. Reiterating these kinds of notions, even in a playful way (Professor Olson talked about a t-shirt saying "pussy grabs back" as a reference to Donald

Trump's "Grab 'em by the pussy") might only support the idea of women being subordinate to men and theirs to "grab" which is why we need to be careful in how we use this kind of rhetoric. A current example that fits into this category is the debate about the discriminatory rhetoric the German smoothie producers *true fruits* use in their advertisement. For years, their advertisement has been problematized as they frequently used controversial phrases like "Unser Quotenschwarzer" for a black smoothie bottle or "Abgefüllt & mitgenommen" to motivate people to reuse their glass bottles. The first example is a racist statement and the latter one, in my opinion, supports rape culture, i.e. a society that normalizes or trivializes sexual assault and abuse. According to them it is used satirically which – at this point does not seem valid anymore – but even if it was they need to realize that in times in which we witness an enormous shift to right-wing politics in almost all of Europe and the United States that a company as part of the public sphere has a certain responsibility to not fuel discrimination. I think that if *true fruits* were truly trying to be satirical like a political magazine for example than they would know how to contextualize their puns better.



Nonetheless, I learned a lot of lessons during this class. One of them was how often we talk about patriarchy and how bad men supposedly are, but we forget that women also play a big part in upholding the system, as I have stated before. That is why I will continue to question my behavior, habits and I used to regard as

‘natural’. Lastly, talking about the importance of standing up for others has inspired me even more to not tolerate discriminatory forms of rhetoric and behavior whenever I detect them. I am convinced that there are certainly areas in my daily life in which discriminatory phrases or practices might occur but have become so normalized that I will have to take closer looks and do the work.

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