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SCENES IN AND OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN CONTESTING FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE ON THE SEMI-PERIPHERY

Scene u i izvan biblioteke: kontinuitet i promena u osporavanju feminističkog znanja na poluperiferiji

ABSTRACT: Feminist sociological research is well institutionalised in the Czech Republic with two major departments at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences. However, it would be wrong to believe that the knowledge produced by them goes uncontested. In the article, we analyse the de-legitimizing strategies used to discredit and denounce such knowledge in two particular cases that entered the media in 2015 and 2017. In the first case, feminist sociologists criticized an exhibition of photographs of nudes presented as part of an event aimed at attracting schoolchildren and youth to science. In the latter case, a Czech documentary director criticized a rhyme, which strictly delineates roles for boys and girls and appears in a Czech reading book. Both the cases were followed by several analyses and comments by Czech gender studies scholars, and articles employing different strategies to specifically denounce feminist knowledge and expertise. Using thematic analysis, we present three strategies used to denounce feminist/gender studies knowledge and to highlight both its local specificities and commonalities with the global and pan-European “alliance in spirit” identified by Sabine Hark (2017). We conclude by pointing out some local repercussions of the novel “anti-genderism discourse”, its links to other critiques typically found in Central and Eastern Europe and to the pan-European trends.

KEYWORDS: anti-feminism, anti-genderism, de/legitimization strategies, geopolitical context, Czech Republic

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APSTRAKT *Feminističko sociološko istraživanje je institucionalizovano u Češkoj Republici na dva najvažnija departmana u Institutu za sociologiju Češke akademije nauka. Međutim, bilo bi pogrešno zaključiti da znanje koje se na njima proizvede nije osporavano. U ovom članku mi analiziramo strategije de-legitimizacije koje se koriste da se diskredituje i obezvredi ovo znanje, u dva posebna slučaja koji su bili medijski prisutni 2015. i 2017. godine. U prvom slučaju, feministički sociolozi su kritikovali izložbu fotografija aktova koja je predstavljena kao deo događaja koji je trebalo da privuče decu školskog uzrasta i mlade da se bave naukom. U drugom slučaju, radi se o kritici pesmice koja se nalazi u češkoj čitanci, a u kojoj su striktno podeljene uloge između dečaka i devojčica. Oba slučaja su praćena nekolicinom analiza i komentara naučnica koje se bave ženskim studijama, kao i tekstovima koji upotrebljavaju različite strategije da ospore feminističko znanje i stručnost. Koristeći tematsku analizu, predstavljamo tri strategije koje su korišćene u osporavanju znanja iz oblasti feminističkih/rodnih studija, a koje osvetljavaju i lokalne specifičnosti i zajedništvo globalnog i pan-evropskog “duhovnog savezništva” kako ga je okarakterisala Sabine Hark (2017). U zaključku iznosimo neke lokalne posledice novog “anti-genderism” diskursa, i kakarktersitike njegove povezanosti sa sličnim kritikama koje se mogu naći u Centralnoj i Istočnoj Evropi, i u drugim pan-evropskim trendovima.*

KLJUČNE REČI: anti-feminizam, anti-genderism, de/legitimizacijske strategije, geopolitički kontekst, Češka Republika

Introduction: Feminists as “Female and Male Imams of Genderistics”

Gender ideology, genderism, genderistics and other “misleading terms”³ (Kováts and Pöim 2015, 11) have lately started to dominate the public debate on issues as diverse as European values, same-sex marriage, sexual education and sexual violence against women. German sociologist Sabine Hark links this to the rise of what she calls the “alliance in spirit” gathered around the theme of “anti-genderism”.⁴ (Hark 2017, 20).

3 Arguably, gender ideology is a term used specifically in (social) psychology to define understandings of gender roles and appropriate gendered behaviours in different groups and societies where gender and sex are usually used as synonyms. This academic use is by no means to be confused with the “gender ideology” offered by the far right and other political groups not only in Europe, which dispossesses the original critical edge of gender as a social process, suggesting any critical analysis of gendered interactions, institutions etc. is by definition ideological and therefore unscientific, false and abused for unjustified, manipulative political goals of a miniscule but seemingly omnipotent group the composition of which changes with the source of the “anti-genderism” discourse (Hark 2017; Kováts 2017; Kováts and Pöim 2015).

4 Anti-genderism is another example of curious dispossession of a terminus technicus as genderism as a term was originally coined by sociologist Ervin Goffman for analysis of the emergence of inequalities in society (Hark 2017).

We wish to contribute to the analyses of this global phenomenon and specifically its Central and Eastern European forms with an analysis of local expressions of the discourse identified by Hark (2017) on a sample of 121 articles around two cases which both elicited an often hostile response to a critique offered in first case by gender studies scholar and in the second case by a famous director of socially critical documentary films. We focus on three distinct, yet interrelated topics that emerged from a thematic analysis with an aim to highlight a) locally specific strategies reflecting historical developments and their geopolitical interpretation/overlaps, b) the values at stake, and c) the strategies used to make claims to truth and thereby ostracize and eventually silence a whole epistemological tradition of gender studies, together with its salience for democratic political systems. In our analysis, we show that the Czech context, generally defined by its secular nature (Holubec and Rae 2010), can serve as an illuminating example of how the anti-genderism discourse works and what some of its sources are beyond the elsewhere manifest Catholic Church socio-political interventions (Anić 2015; Graff 2014; Stańczyk 2017).

The paper is organized as follows: we first briefly introduce the theoretical underpinnings of the paper, then move to contextualizing the sample, present the methodology and main results of the conducted thematic analysis. We conclude by highlighting key commonalities as well as local idiosyncrasies in a wider European context.

Theoretical Insights From the “Semi-Periphery”

The anti-genderism discourse is a global phenomenon, yet its repercussions are typically studied as nation-state based case studies (Graff 2014; Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017). Given the language and historical differences, it may seem intuitive to focus on individual case studies as such an approach guarantees identifying concrete examples of the local impacts of the discourse on policy making, the discipline of gender studies and its standing, political discourse etc. However, as Eszter Kováts has shown, the scope of individual case studies is insufficient for yielding a comprehensive understanding of what is going on and what is at stake (Kováts 2017). While individual case studies are necessary and valuable, in isolation, they may fail to draw the big picture and highlight the overlaps and mutual influences that occur within larger geopolitical wholes and globally. This is problematic as exactly the mutual influences and interconnections, the “alliance in spirit” (Hark 2017, 20) for which gender works as a “symbolic glue” (Kováts and Pöim 2015), seem to distinguish this particular discourse from more traditional frameworks of Catholic conservatism, homophobia and antifeminism (Kováts 2017). They in fact make it possible to speak of a “movement” (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

To describe the anti-genderism discourse and the interconnection between the above mentioned theoretical concepts in more detail, we can use Hark’s (2017, 20) definition. Hark specifically mentions the global anti-genderism discourse makes a deliberately misleading connection between the expertise

of gender studies and totalitarian practices: “genderism” is constructed as a totalitarian project of social engineering similar to other totalitarian projects such as communism or fascism. Hence “anti-genderism” serves at least a threefold function. First, the forces gathered under this umbrella term can present themselves as the saviors of ordinary men and women, of Western civilization, and of mankind. Second, “anti-genderism” fulfills the function of symbolic glue for an otherwise quite heterogeneous spectrum of neo-reactionary forces. Third, it serves as a cover-up of a much bigger attempt to change the values underlying European liberal democracies.” (Hark 2017, 20).

What then seems to constitute the novelty of the now relatively richly researched discourse, and how to approach it? Although strategies that delegitimize feminist knowledge are well researched and documented, what is new about these “alliance in spirit” strategies is that opponents are willing to disregard their own – and often contradictory – goals because all of them agree on the fundamental idea that “gender ideology” is dangerous. Kuhar and Paternotte also note that what they see as an anti-gender movement is increasingly transnational in Europe, which is exemplified by the fact that different groups across Europe copy one another’s strategies and modes of protest (2017: 2). The impression of a transnational movement corresponds with Hark’s “alliance in spirit” in that it strives to highlight the interconnectedness characteristic of both types of activities deployed by the activists and discursive means and tropes they use. What work as the “symbolic glue” is the way the different groups use concepts produced by gender studies but offer and spread their own interpretations of these that are largely completely divorced from the original meanings. As a next step they take up these interpretations from each other giving the impression that these are the adequate interpretations of these not intuitively understandable concepts. (Hark 2017).

The transnational nature of the discourse requires that we go beyond clearly delimited case studies to consider local findings in light of similar studies from an area (geopolitical, economic, symbolical etc.) that seems to constitute a meaningful whole of some sort. We therefore focus on what Marina Blagojevic calls the European semi-periphery (Blagojevic 2004) as we believe some of the tropes present in the global anti-genderism discourse as defined by Hark (2017) can be well linked to present disputes over the very meaning of democracy. Although such contestations seem to dominate the global political narratives, they tend to share some specific traits in post-authoritarian societies of Central and Eastern Europe where pre-1989 official discourse would stress equality and concrete gender policies (Oates-Indruchová 2012) while democratization was seen as coming equally from neoliberal economic measures implemented by the World Bank and liberal political mentors (Myant and Drahokoupil 2011). This is not to say, however, that we want to question the salience of overlaps and mutual influences between this area and e.g. the larger EU framework (Cerwonka 2008; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2016). Rather, we see the local cases as well suited to highlight some aspects of the discourse that may otherwise be seen as secondary if the focus stays on the traditional explanatory frameworks decried by Kováts (2017). We therefore now turn to the context of the two cases we analyze.

Contextualizing the Sample

The two cases of controversy around who can legitimately analyze gender relations and whose knowledge is considered ideological and therefore also illegitimate span the period of two years. The first case emerged in 2015 and concerned an exhibition within the framework of the Week of Science⁵ and Technology festival annually organized by the Czech Academy of Sciences. Although the festival aims at the general public, it mostly targets schoolchildren and students for it wishes to attract them to careers/studies in science. At one of the festival sites, the Library of the Czech Academy of Sciences located in the same building as the Academy Presidium, a small photographic exhibition by an amateur photographer with personal ties to one of the library employees was held called *Scenes in the Library* (see the Appendix for examples of photographs exhibited). After a futile exchange with the head of the library enquiring about the relevance of the exhibition to the festival and its main target audience, a researcher at the Institute of Sociology wrote an opinion piece criticizing the exhibition for its blatant sexism as well as racism to a national broadsheet daily (Cidlinská 2015). The first part of our sample comprises 60 articles that appeared in response to her critique.

The second case emerged in early 2017 when a Czech documentary filmmaker, Vít Klusák, critically commented on his Facebook on a rhyme he found in his child's reading book (see the Appendix for a translation of the contested part of the rhyme). To keep the sample coherent, we analyzed 61 articles that responded to the case in Czech print and online media (the media outlets included major national dailies such as Blesk and Mladá Fronta as well as their online versions and online only media). In both cases, we limited our search to articles appearing within two weeks after the first article appeared in print media. We searched for the articles through the online Newton Media database of Czech media articles using keywords (and their combinations) for each case – “feminists”, “exhibition”, “CAS library” and “Žáček” (author of the rhyme), “rhyme”, “What purpose do girls serve in the world” (the rhyme's title).

The two cases are linked as they were both started by a criticism aimed at sexism presented as an acceptable social norm to children and the youth within the framework of education (schools attend the science festival as a field trip activity, the rhyme appears in a reading book). Moreover, both the cases concern content that some may consider artistic, which supports claims of censorship attempted by the “female fighters for women's rights,” “women pseudoscientists,” “feminist/gender female jihadists,” “gender censors,” “gender police,” “fanatical supporters of gender,” “guardians of gender purity,” “main supporters of political correctness,” “ideological pressure group,” “fans of a discriminatory discourse,” “radical Czech feminism,” or condescendingly put “our feminists.”⁶

5 In Czech, the word “science” may mean both natural and social sciences and humanities.

6 All the translations in the text were made by the authors.

Given the often deliberately vague definition of the discursively constructed “them” – as the different names given to the group indicate – it is not exactly easy to pinpoint who the target

We chose official media as the source for the sample. Unlike social media, the content of official media is supervised and approved by the editors and owners of the media outlets are subject to media legislation. At the same time, the official media framework elicits certain values in the content and follows patterns that are not typically studied when the anti-genderism discourse is analyzed. Namely, in the Czech case, media ownership after 1989 was first almost entirely bought with foreign capital only to be lately increasingly dominated by local oligarchs and entrepreneurs (Šafr 2017). At the same time, publishing in official media outlets is affected by the newsworthiness of content, which increases with aspects such as negativity and emotionality. This needs to be taken into account when interpreting media content (Appeltoová, Možíšová, and Vochocová 2016) because it is also predictability that affects the coverage granted to a news item – although usually associated with scheduled regularly reoccurring events, predictability is applicable also to content, which has proven to be attractive for the audience in the past. In our particular case, this means that Czech media is likely to publish on controversies around gender issues that seem to be divisive and elicit emotionally charged responses from both readers and contributors.

Methodology

The analysis presented below is based on a qualitative analysis of the sample using thematic coding, which strives to identify key patterns in data and is frequently used to analyze media content (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Since we are both members of the gender studies expert community, we actively followed both the cases and could therefore opt for a top-down analyst-driven approach to the data. In particular, we looked for different argumentation strategies used by contributors and readers to discredit and denounce feminist and gender studies knowledge and expertise. As Ruth Wodak states, looking for argumentation strategies is useful for the analyses of discourse because they can give us an answer to the question *“By means of what arguments or argumentation scheme, linguistic structures and rhetorical devices do these leaders try to justify, legitimize and naturalize the exclusion, discrimination or demonization of others?”* (Wodak, 2001: 72). Certainly, in our case we do not deal with “leaders” in the sense she implies. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of opinion pieces in the two cases were penned by established journalists, authors and experts (on unrelated topics). They were largely critical of the very possibility there could be an academic research in the area of social sciences that might be scientifically sound and worth intellectually engaging with. Specifically, they were adamant such research is mutually exclusive with the discipline of gender studies. This is a majority and legitimate position in the media and we therefore need to understand how it gets legitimized.

is. Feminist activism seems to be used interchangeably with gender studies scholars thereby denying any differences that have been at the core of debates into academic versus activist feminism (Šmausová 2008).

Since the focus of this thematic issue is on anti-genderism or as Agnieszka Graff puts it simply anti-gender alliance (Graff 2014), we prioritize the interpretation of articles that relate to gender studies and feminism/feminists negatively. It needs to be acknowledged that a number of authors, both from within the broader feminist scene and outside of it strived to engage in an actual dialogue or chose to respond to the often highly emotional and even vulgar attacks. This needs not be underestimated as it appears that along with the anti-gender discourse there are responses that point out the threat the anti-gender discourse poses to the foundations of democracy itself – as Hark warns: “At stake is also the explicit discrediting of science and the university as a place where reality is questioned and negotiated unconditionally, as a part of an open, democratic society that can view things from many different perspectives. This open, democratic society is itself at stake.” (Hark 2017, 25). Although we do not focus on this diverse group here, we believe that just like the media framework it merits more research attention for it seems to set the present anti-genderism discourse together with its opponents apart from the older anti-feminist discourses present in the CEE region since the 1990s. In the “classical” anti-feminism discourse, the defence of feminist positions came mostly from experts in the field. At present, the opposition to the anti-genderism discourse is more diverse. Thus, there are clear inspirations and continuity with the anti-feminism discourse in both argumentation strategies and concrete individuals but there is also change. It seems to at least partly stem from the anti-immigration, xenophobic and anti-religious freedom tropes raised in the articles targeting feminist activism and gender studies as a discipline at present.

In the analysis we relied on techniques designed within the tradition of discourse theory (Rose 2013) and critical discourse theory (Van Leeuwen 2007; Reyes 2011). From the latter tradition, we specifically focus on techniques used for de/legitimization in discourse whereas from the broad spectrum of discourse theory, we focus on strategies used for making or discrediting claims to truth. In the following summary of the analysis, we focus on three different de-legitimizing strategies that dominate the efforts to marginalize and silence critical studies into gender as a social process as well as attempts at fostering an actual dialogue.

De-Legitimizing Strategies

1. Link to the Past and Totalitarian Practices

The first argumentation strategy to de-legitimize feminist/gender studies-based knowledge was to connect feminism and its perceived/alleged practices to communism and/or radical Islamism. Communism and radical Islamism are combined as they are believed to share an emphasis on censorship and the act of suppressing freedom. Both are also defined as purely ideological. The association of feminists with these practices gives the impression that feminists possess power to censor. Thus “they” – the feminists/genderists – hold illegitimate power to suppress freedom denied to and at the expense of the “us” group. Opponents

often argued that feminism wants to prohibit something, for example images of naked women, an exhibition or a reading book. The technique deployed is relatively simple – first, the triggers of each case (photographic exhibition, rhyme in a reading book) were presented in highly positive terms and often equaled with art.⁷ This prepared the ground for equaling the critics with censors, which conveniently leads to raising the specter of local communist censorship (especially among older generation that has spent most of its life in communist regime) as the following quote illustrates:

“These sentences (extract from the official statement made by feminists critically responding to the photographic exhibition) could have been published in Rudé Právo (Red Justice, the official daily of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) in 1955 and fit perfectly with the spirit of that time. The affinity is obvious. We can laugh at it but it is very scary at the same time. Just like in 1955.”

The 1950s are generally understood as the darkest communist times in Czechoslovakia that even the contemporary Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia does not publicly associate with. The widespread acceptance of this interpretation of history is indirectly corroborated by the fact that one of the opinion pieces that assembled negative opinions on the critique of the rhyme from various authors in a single article was published by Haló Noviny, the present-day daily associated with this political party.

Besides evoking historically specific totalitarian practices, this delegitimizing strategy is also used to associate feminist misdeeds with the practices of the Islamic State and Islamist radicals in general as they, too, strive to suppress freedom (of speech, or in these cases artistic freedom). Authors often warn that feminism is a real threat because just like Islamism, it strives to limit “our” freedom:

“The demand to remove the exhibition, immediately heeded by the functionaries of the Czech Academy of Sciences, was signed by men and women imams of genderistics in our country. (...) It is Muslim imams who are the champions in the campaigns against feminine beauty and displays of the female body nowadays. That is why I call them: men “imams” and women imamists.”

The aim here is to portray feminism/gender studies etc. as a dangerous fanatic ideology and fundamentalism that poses a threat specifically to “our” (hard-won) freedom and democracy. This is achieved through constructing parallels between the perceived goals of feminism and those of ideologies against which the authors do not have to pose specific arguments as they are generally accepted as either a threat from the past (communism) or from the future (Islamism). As Antonio

⁷ It is perhaps notable that the bulk of the marginal support given by scholars from the Academy of Sciences in the library case to their colleague from the field of gender studies in an internal exchange came from art historians who were less concerned with the social and educational merits of the exhibition and more with the poor quality of the photographs and exhibition presented.

Reyes states, fear elicited in connection with the past and future/potential atrocities may be the right emotion to use if you want to demonize your enemy (Reyes 2011). In order to instigate fear while constructing “them”, it is necessary to make the impression that the enemy has – illegitimate – power over the fate of “us”, which needs to be publicly denounced and stopped. This is achieved through suggesting the enemy has influence over the establishment (in the quote above represented by the functionaries of the Czech Academy of Sciences) and gained this influence unfairly and unjustifiably. This becomes a very important trait in the whole anti-genderism discourse. An anti-establishment sentiment is what seems to drive the popularity of “neo-authoritative” political groups, as sociologist Maciej Gdula calls them (Gdula, Debska, and Trepka 2017). In his and his colleagues’ study of values and attitudes of voters of the Polish Law and Justice Party, an anti-establishment sentiment works as glue for the demographically heterogeneous group of its supporters. The sentiment provides them with a feeling of moral superiority over the alienated, corrupt and arrogant group – the establishment. Our analysis suggests that it is gender and those associated with it that works as the materialization of this sentiment.

2. Defense of the “Traditional” and “Natural” Gender Order

The second de-legitimization strategy is linked directly to the seeming merit of the two cases (and of the global anti-genderism discourse), i.e. who is entitled to speak about gender relations in Czech society and on what grounds. In other words, whose knowledge and epistemological position counts and whose does not and why. Typically, in this argumentation strategy, feminism and gender studies are blamed for the perceived disintegration of the “traditional” gender order. This is paradoxical as the gender order is painted as immutable and heavily set in “biological truths”, usually symbolized through the emotional as well as carnal nature of maternity, strictly heteronormative family and clearly outlined differences between men and women:

”A pregnant woman may feel like a man as much as she likes but she will still end up at the gynaecologist’s.”

The usual tropes of the anti-genderism discourse are all present: feminists and the like are allegedly against motherhood, are guilty of social engineering as they wish to erase all sex differences, and, in some cases, even sexual relations between men and women although none of these issues were even touched upon in the feminist critiques of the exhibition and the rhyme.⁸

“What I think makes this ideology (feminism) very problematic is that it denies the concept of the human nature (including) natural differences between men and women. You don’t defend women’s rights at all, you are trying to make men and women interchangeable, you are trying to make others stop distinguishing between them.”

8 It is remarkable how frequently the author of the photographs and of the rhyme were approached and cited in the pieces while this was not be the case for the critics.

“In the first place, I was very surprised that anyone would question the fact that being a mom is an important and beautiful woman’s role. I think that if we keep having such, excuse my language, stupid discussions over even stupider ideas suggesting the rhyme is something harmful, we will harm the moms.”

The strategy deployed by these authors is to present themselves as defenders of the “traditional” gender order. They show they are prepared to protect “traditional” womanhood, motherhood and/or family values in contrast with feminism or more precisely local misled feminists. This difference is salient, as the first quote above ostensibly challenges the association of the critique with a justified attempt at defending women’s rights. Thus, women’s rights and the need to protect them are seemingly not questioned; rather it is the deviant form of ideology presented by local gender studies scholars that needs to be stopped because they allegedly want to destroy “traditional” values and the gender binary itself. In this case, the “traditional values” are not negotiable and need not be explicitly defined or justified: it is a situation where legitimacy is based on the fact that “this is what we have always done”, which precludes any “why” questions (van Leeuwen 2007). At the same time, the trope of nature and naturalness is evoked, which has been shown to serve to preclude any rational, political, moral – let alone feminist – investigation of the issues thereby defined as preceding any social influences (Butler 1999; Rose 2013). This is not a new technique and besides constituting one of the traits of the “anti-genderism” discourse (Hark 2017), it is one of the tropes that suggest continuity with previous anti-feminist strategies present in the Czech public discourse since the 1990s.

The values at stake called “traditional” frequently remain as under-defined as the arguments and stances of feminists in the eyes of the proponents of the anti-genderism discourse. This is important because it leaves room for dispossessing elements of the feminist discourse that seem to be in compliance with democracy as redefined by the “alliance in spirit”. Democracy is newly defined as a neo-authoritative regime granting almost ultimate power to the winners of elections (Gdula, Debska, and Trepka 2017). In the Czech context, this is in line with the local interpretation of democracy promoted by the former Czech president Václav Klaus and his followers defended since the 1990s. His followers include the far right D.O.S.T. Initiative⁹ formed around 2007 to defend “traditional” conservative values that managed to attract supporters from established political parties (Kříhová 2012). Despite the secular character of Czech society, it is through similar initiatives that ideas regarding sexuality, reproductive rights and family inspired by the Catholic Church mostly analyzed in Poland (Gdula, Debska, and Trepka 2017; Graff 2014; Holubec and Rae 2010; Stańczyk 2017) inform the local anti-genderism discourse.

9 The acronym stands for Trust, Objectivity, Freedom and Tradition while meaning E.N.O.U.G.H. at the same time – enough of attacks against these values.

3. *Claims to Truth*

The third argumentation strategy used in order to de-legitimize feminist and gender studies knowledge is to define it as at odds with “the one and only truth”. The strategy is simple: it requires the definition of what is “really” and “objectively” important for people/society, which is often achieved through appeals to the common sense of “an ordinary person”. The strategy works with the notion of a “rational majority”, whose duty is to oppose and stop pernicious feminist ideas and practices. These are specifically detrimental for they obscure “how things really are” with a biased ideology that has nothing to do with objectivity, let alone science.

“One feels like mentioning a mountain made out of a molehill if it wasn’t for the strong echo of the furious reaction of women gender jihadists (...). This time, with their fussy attack, they have apparently roused the still-silent majority that considers such disputes in connection with reality not only stupid but also hysterical, self-serving and drawing attention away from real issues.”

“The scandal of removing the photographs of half-naked women (...) from the Academic Library following the pressure coming from two obscure women’s associations served to amuse the public and give rise to mostly funny media reactions. But it is not so funny. When someone claims the right to interfere with freedom of speech and academic freedoms based on completely ideological positions, it is necessary to be very cautious.”

This strategy seems to be the most efficient one in creating the “us versus them” dichotomy. By claiming the only rational/democratic/moral truth, “they” are automatically defined as in error, irrational and/or even insane. Such a definition of one’s opponents then makes it possible to completely side-line any of their arguments and instead justifies an attack against them. In other words, the epistemological claims of gender studies as a discipline are denounced because they strive to analyze and possibly challenge the “only truth”, which “automatically implies the (de)legitimizing of alternative positions” (Reyes 2011: 804).

This de-legitimizing strategy is especially targeted against the discipline of gender studies as it strives to deny any of its claims to truth made within the framework of science and its principles. Unlike other disciplines and their often counter-intuitive claims, the social critiques offered by gender studies are measured against “common sense”. “Common sense” often seems to resonate with the ideas about naturalness of the gender order mentioned in the previous section. Thus, the problem that affects the relatively heterogeneous yet highly interconnected and small feminist scene is both the nature of the backlash (avoiding any actual discussion of issues identified by gender studies scholars as pertinent to our society) and the fact that for the most part, it is often embraced even by fellow academics who should actually be able to distinguish between science and pseudoscience. This is a strategy to be found also in other parts of the European semi-periphery (Pereira 2014).

Conclusions

The aim of our paper was to offer an analysis of local expressions of the anti-genderism discourse and specifically to relate it to studies that strive to provide a complex view of the anti-democratic, xenophobic and racist elements presented in the discourse. We focused on three argumentation strategies identified in the selected sample that made it possible to both point out geopolitically contingent strategies (parallels between communism and feminism, drawing on a narrow local understanding of democracy that is compatible with a neo-authoritative regime) as well as tropes that seem to be found across Europe (defense of “traditional” values, discrediting gender studies as an academic discipline). These strategies are by no means the only patterns in the data, as e.g. the labeling/naming of “they” hinted.

Besides the focus on specificities and commonalities, continuity and change, we also wanted to draw attention to the importance of taking seriously not only who the speakers are but also which media they get access to. Our two cases appeared in all types of media but we believe that by focusing only on official media outlets, albeit including readers’ responses, we may actually speak of a meditated public discourse, which might be slightly more difficult in the case of social media. Future research needs to address newsworthiness and values that underlie publishing procedures and the concept of gate-keeping and agenda setting if we are to better understand the actual scope of the issue.

While we have outlined some of the geopolitical idiosyncrasies and commonalities, we largely did not engage the question of novelty of the anti-genderism discourse. Locally, many from the scene under attack seem to associate it with the previous anti-feminist discourse that dominated especially some media outlets in the 1990s (Škvorecký 1992; Ulč 1994). The backlash of the 1990s shares with the present attacks a reliance on local aversion to communism, which allegedly subverted “traditions” by making women work and placing children in nurseries – although women of course worked long before 1948 (Bahenská, Heczková, and Musilová 2017) and the drive to push women into the home came primarily from the World Bank to optically lower post-1989 unemployment (Víšek 2006). The continuities with this discourse are important for understanding the salience/domination of some arguments that may be less important in locations outside the semi-periphery. However, we also need not overlook the connections with anti-establishment critiques (mostly apparent in electoral results) and other tropes to be found both within and outside the semi-periphery as those are the ones that enable us to speak of a new discourse. We cannot ignore that the global as well more specifically pan-European “alliance in spirit” with its argumentation strategies and their breeding ground pose a threat to the survival of both academic freedoms and democracy understood not as a neo-authoritative rule of the elected few nor as the rule of the majority but as an essentially dialogical enterprise. To go back to local repercussions, the new anti-genderism discourse leads to bizarre situations: the Institute of Sociology was approached in 2017 by a journalist wishing to write about the state of gender equality in Czech society. What she asked for, apparently because of the pressures at her editorial office, was

a sociologist who does not come from one of the two departments that deal with gender studies in order “to guarantee the source’s credibility”.

To conclude on a more positive note, we believe that the uproar and moral panic raised by issues believed by the anti-genderism discourse proponents to be “stupid”, “trivial”, “trifle” can be read as a response to the perception that gender studies and feminism actually possess – illegitimate – power. As Chafetz and Dworkin point out (1987, 56): “As the feminist movement becomes more successful, it becomes more threatening, and the opposition becomes more organized. (...) It is a sign of their own movement’s success, for it indicates that they have managed to convince a sizeable segment of their opposition, that they constitute a serious threat to established social arrangement.”

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Appendix

1. Photographs from the exhibition Scenes in the library (examples)



2. Excerpt from the rhyme *What purpose do girls serve in the world?* in the children's reading book (Jiří Žáček 1991, translation Blanka Nyklová)

What purpose do girls serve in the world?

To become moms,
to give a nice smile
to the tiny ones.

To caress us
and tell us a fairy tale.

That's why moms are here –
to make the world nice and fair.