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Only ! know my gender: The individualist turn in gender theory and politics, and the right-wing opposition

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Abstract

The goal of this theoretical paper is to link right-wing anti-gender claims to real processes of the individualization of gender analysis in light of the critical literature on how neoliberal ideology has been affecting feminist politics and gender scholarship. While there has been reflexion about the co-optation of feminist vocabularies such as choice, liberation, and self-determination by neoliberal ideology for a long time, recent critiques add to this the individualist turn within gender theory, and feminist and LGBT activism too. I argue that uncovering these latter trends can contribute to a better understanding of the resonance of right-wing anti-gender messages among large segments of European electorates but also to (self-) critical discussion within gender theory and feminist and LGBT practice about the individualization of structural problems.

Keywords: anti-gender movements, right-wing populism, neoliberalism, gender theory, gender identity

1 Introduction

Only ! know my gender – this piece of graffiti in a women’s toilet at Hamburg University in November 2018 intrigued me. While I was aware of the newest trends related to trans and queer activism in Western European and North American countries, coming from a country where the right-wing government has been refusing to ratify the Istanbul Convention¹ with the argument that it would promote the idea that gender can be freely decided upon, this graffiti struck me as proving their point about the meaning of gender: that it is within an individual’s capacity to define. Further, replacing ‘i’ by ‘!’ gives extra emphasis to the claim of authenticity: that the individual is the sole legitimate interpreter of his or her identity, and that this cannot be questioned. All in all, this short sentence expresses the monologicistic,

¹ The Council of Europe *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, opened for signature on 11 May 2011, in Istanbul, Turkey, came into force on 1 August 2014.

subjectivist, and dogmatic character of the newest gender claims, and at the same time the rejection of knowledge based on social science – it is an illustrative summary of a phenomenon, hence the choice of title for this paper.²

In the first step I will briefly describe the politicization of gender in the discourse of the Right over the recent decade, before turning to Hungary. Then I will discuss the changes in the meaning of gender within progressive activism and policymaking, which I see as a move from a structural perspective towards an individual one. I will situate this shift within a broader framework that is discussed by critical scholarship of the ideational underpinning of neoliberalism: individualization. In a last step I will link right-wing anti-gender discourse with this individualized approach to gender.

2 Anti-gender politics

Anti-gender politics has been a global phenomenon since the beginning of the 2010s, with roots in the 1990s and 2000s (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Reproductive rights, violence against women, sexual education, LGBT issues, gender mainstreaming, gender studies, supranational organisations (like the UN, EU, and WHO) and treaties (like the Istanbul Convention) are being targeted by conservative social movements and right-wing populist parties. Some of the issues are old areas of contestation of the Right (like abortion), while others are new (like gender studies). What connects them is that they are now contested for being representative of ‘gender ideology’ or ‘genderism’, and as representing a global conspiracy to destroy human civilisation. A discourse originally developed by Popes and intellectuals affiliated with the Vatican (*ibid.*), this framing has by now become disconnected from its religious origins and is freely deployed by various political actors, from social movements to political parties. While several current feminist and LGBT claims and academic endeavours are contested from within these movements and academic studies, what distinguishes these critiques from the anti-gender phenomenon is the latter’s homogenization and vilification: despite their heterogeneity all actors and claims of feminist and LGBT politics, gender policy-making, and gender studies are treated within the anti-gender discourse as being one organized lobby, and their actors presented as a threat to children, the nation, and human civilization.

The usage of the term ‘gender’ marks a clear difference to former antifeminist and homophobic contestations. It politicizes a formerly academic concept and attributes various contents to it – ‘gender’ thus serves as symbolic glue, symbolizing and connecting various perceived or real failures of current progressive politics (Grzebalska et al., 2017):

‘Gender ideology’ has come to signify the failure of democratic representation, and opposition to this ideology has become a means of rejecting different facets of the current socioeconomic order, from the prioritization of identity politics over material issues, and the weakening of people’s social, cultural and political security, to the detachment of social and political elites and the influence of transnational institutions and the global economy on nation states. (Grzebalska et al., 2017)

² To illustrate this trend of gender activism by one example from politics too: The Commissioner for the Acceptance of Sexual and Gender Diversity of the Scholz government since end of 2021 in Germany formulated the same claim as in the graffiti in March 2021, back then as spokesperson for queer politics of the group of the Greens in the federal Parliament: ‘Only one person can determine and give information about their body, sexuality and gender – each person himself/herself.’ <https://twitter.com/svenlehmann/status/1377182730820050950>

One of the things opposition to ‘gender’ might compress and eventually symbolize, is, I will argue, the individualist philosophy of the current neoliberal order.

“[G]ender theory” found fertile ground in the individualist anthropology of neoliberalism’, claims Jutta Burggraf, one of the anti-gender ideologists of the early days of the anti-gender phenomenon, when the Catholic Church played a significant role in developing and spreading the discourse (quoted by Carnac 2014, p. 137). The right-wing actors mobilizing against what they call ‘gender ideology’ identify the connection between the term ‘gender’ and neoliberalism in the idea that gender is freely chosen, not constrained by norms, nature, and biological sex.

While anti-gender actors cannot be all classified as anti-neoliberal in economic terms,³ they indeed address one part of neoliberalism in relation to which so-called progressive actors are unwittingly allied with their claims. This proposal is far from being new: Nancy Fraser stated in her article about Trump’s election that ‘Trump’s victory is not solely a revolt against global finance. What his voters rejected was not neoliberalism *tout court*, but *progressive* neoliberalism [...], an alliance of mainstream currents of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights), on the one side, and high-end “symbolic” and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood), on the other’ (Fraser 2016, p. 281, emphasis in the original). What the Right seems to address about neoliberalism is how this ideology shapes cultural values: that the individual is taken out of context. The Right accuses ‘gender ideology’ and its presumed promoters of being a vehicle of this individualist trend.

This accusation – that thematizes actually existing trends – begs the question: shall political actors and researchers committed to human rights recognize all individual claims, or is there a respectful way to critically analyse these trends within academia and politics? This paper attempts to contribute to this debate.

3 Anti-gender politics in Hungary

Hungary is a latecomer to anti-gender rhetoric and mobilization: while there were scattered incidences of anti-gender rhetoric from 2009 onwards, anti-gender campaigns began to unfold only in 2017. This may be explained by the fact that the right-wing populist coalition of Fidesz (Alliance of Young Democrats) and KDNP (the Christian Democratic People’s Party), in power since 2010, and ruling for most of the time with a constitution-changing two-thirds majority,⁴ – in contrast to other countries where anti-gender actors became active in re-

³ Either because they pursue neoliberal economic policies or because the economic realm is irrelevant for them, as it is for religious NGO actors.

⁴ A description of the Orbán regime is outside of the scope of this paper – one can find a myriad of insightful political science analyses about this; also concerning whether it is populist, and if so, how (elitist, neoliberal, authoritarian, paternalist, illiberal populist, etc.); or treats populism as just one element of the regime: electoral authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, plebiscitary leader democracy, hybrid authoritarian state capitalism, etc. A brief summary of the institutional changes since 2010 can be found e.g., in Enyedi and Krekó (2018); and of the role of the EU in sustaining and building legitimacy for the regime in Bozóki and Hegedűs (2018). Two recent volumes giving a broad and original account are Körösenyi et al. (2020) and Scheiring (2020).

sponse to progressive gender-related legislation – did not plan any legislation to trigger an anti-gender protest. The discourse intensified when it was of use for promoting the polarizing goals of the government itself (Kováts & Pető, 2017).

A defining feature of PM Orbán's regime is the use of ongoing publicly funded fear-mongering hate campaigns that target alleged enemies (migrants, liberals, George Soros, or so-called 'gender ideologists') who are presented as committed to destroying the nation. This communication is designed to polarize society and to generate a feeling of being under constant threat. It maintains a wartime narrative, so that the government can present itself as the only true defender and representative of the people against external threats. Hence, in Hungary the government is the main anti-gender actor. The concept of 'gender' became part of the image of the enemy only as recently as spring 2017, but since then has appeared on an almost daily basis in Hungarian government discourse, mainly in an outsourced form in propaganda media and other government-related organisations. The main fields of contestation where 'gender' is vilified are gender studies (de-accreditation of gender studies MA programs in state universities followed in October 2018) (Gagyi, 2018), the Istanbul Convention (the Hungarian parliament adopted a resolution against ratifying it in May 2020), and in relation to issues of trans and genderqueer political claims in the West – ridiculed on a daily basis in the propaganda media. In May 2020, amidst the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hungarian parliament adopted a new law according to which 'sex at birth' replaced 'sex' in the civil registry, with alteration of this entry not permitted, meaning that it became impossible to legally change one's gender in Hungary. In December the constitution was amended to include the sentence 'The mother is a woman, the father is a man' – to preclude future trans-inclusive changes. In June 2021 the Parliament adopted the so-called 'child protection law' to ban 'LGBT propaganda' in schools, and are holding a referendum about its content in April 2022, coinciding with the parliamentary elections. All these policy changes were rationalized with references to the threatening 'gender ideology'.

To illustrate the position of the Hungarian government, let me quote three documents that show that their definition of gender and 'gender ideology' refers to 'choosing one's own gender'.⁵

In September 2016, some months before the government's anti-gender attacks started, four MPs of the (then) far-right opposition party⁶ Jobbik asked a written question to the relevant ministry about the government's position on 'gender theory'. Here is an excerpt from state secretary Bence Rétvári's answer:

⁵ The present paper attempts to make a theoretical argument; empirical material is used for illustration purposes. However, related empirical research has been conducted and is presented elsewhere (Kováts, 2022). For understanding the position of the Hungarian government and the organizations affiliated with it, I collected gender-related statements from the Prime Minister, the two ministers who regularly comment on gender-related issues (the Minister of Justice and then Minister for Families, now President), the government's answers to written questions of opposition MPs in parliament, as well as texts by intellectuals who openly support the government or work in their media, and by the organisations/think tanks that are either directly affiliated with the government or support it in this question. I coded the documents in order to identify the rationale behind the main frames they utilized: gender as mingling of the sexes; gender as ideology; gender as oppression (imposed by foreign powers); and gender as a crisis.

⁶ From 2014 on the party implemented a turn towards the mainstream, the credibility of which is still debated. Openly radical and fascist members left the party in 2018 and founded a new far-right party called *Mi Hazánk* (Our Fatherland), two of the four members who posed this written question included.

In recent years certain circles have attempted to *distort the original meaning of 'gender'*⁷ and defended ideas that sometimes even question the biological characteristics of men and women, wanting to mingle the sexes and invent new 'genders'. Besides this, they want to change millenary old linguistic structures (see the Swedish or English developments with regard to neutral pronouns or gender-neutral first names) and organise aggressive action that runs counter to Christian values. Most recently, propaganda activity has started *in favour of transgenderism* that cannot be called reasonable anymore. These activities are quite *far from promoting the goals of equal treatment and social equality between men and women*. We stand on the ground of biological naturalness.

The Hungarian government firmly stands on the ground of the Fundamental Law and does not intend to change this: it continues to promote social equality between men and women, to better women's situation and enhance equal treatment. (Rétvári, 2016, emphasis by EK).⁸

What we can see is that the state secretary distinguishes between an old and a new meaning of gender and differentiates between the goal of gender equality in terms of equality between men and women (what the government – in words – subscribes to) and equality among all presumed genders (hence his allusion to the invention of new genders and the not-so-reasonable transgender activism).

This happened in 2016, so before the debate was associated with concrete political stakes: the campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the de-accreditation of gender studies MA programmes, and the anti-LGBT communication campaigns. When those debates surfaced in the context of broader struggles of national sovereignty, academic freedom, and the hegemonic aspirations of the government in February-March 2017, the main argument was that the Convention, gender studies and LGBT organizations would promote so-called gender ideology, which meant in their vocabulary denying the biological reality of the two sexes.

The gender definition of the Istanbul Convention is the following: '3.c. "gender" shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men' (Council of Europe, 2011). While the Convention takes for granted that there are two sexes,⁹ and interprets gender in the sense of cultural meanings and consequences attached to the given two sexes, this did not hamper the government-related organisation Alapjogokért Központ (Centre for Fundamental Rights), a government agency that poses as an independent think tank, from disseminating a distorted version of the content of the document.

Even though it is common sense that *there are only two sexes in creation*, the Convention aims to go against this fact and to do away with the notion of biological sexes and uses the concept of gender

⁷ In the Hungarian language there is only one word for sex/gender (*nem*). The differentiation is made by adding an adjective: biological sex (*biológiai nem*) and social sex (*társadalmi nem*), therefore *nem* is hard to translate when written without the adjective. Here, he used the English word 'gender'; later in the sentence he did not add any adjectives, so translating both *nems* to 'mingling of the sexes' and 'inventing new 'genders' are my interpretations. In other places I also had difficulty translating sentences containing the word *nem* – e.g. 'changing one's own sex' (or gender). The term 'gender' has acquired plenty of meanings (e.g., as synonymous with biological sex, the system of societal expectations towards males and females [masculinity and femininity] and gender identity, cf. Stock, 2019).

⁸ Translations from Hungarian and German into English throughout the text are by the author.

⁹ However, the Convention has an anti-discrimination clause that contains gender identity (Article 4, 3): 'The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status'.

instead for all legal purposes. *People would thus stop being simply men and women, and would belong to one of the infinite number of artificially created gender categories.* (Alapjogokért Központ, 2017, emphasis by EK)

The Emberi Méltóság Központ (Centre Human Dignity), the director of which is also the director of the Hungarian affiliation of the transnational conservative NGO CitizenGO which also collected signatures against the Convention, puts it the following way, twisting the above-quoted definition of the Convention:

According to the definition, gender is a social construct that may vary and, basically, is *independent of biological reality* (the fact that someone is either a man or a woman). Accepting this definition may lead to the denial of natural differences between men and women. (Emberi Méltóság Központ, 2017, pp. 4–5, emphasis by EK)

The Centre for Fundamental Rights softened their definition in a text couple of months later:

[The Convention] treats the roles of women and men not as biological givens in the Creation, but as ‘socially constructed roles’ – so, in case of ‘*progressive*’ legal interpretation one could include ‘asexual genderfluid’ or ‘genderqueer’ too. (Alapjogokért Központ, 2018, p. 3, emphasis by EK)

They acknowledge that the Convention describes the societal roles of men and women (and gender is constructed in this sense); however, they perceive that once the term ‘gender’ is in the Hungarian legal system, it could pave the way to ‘progressive’ (= queer) legal interpretations, therefore it needs to be stopped.

So we can see that the accusation of ‘gender ideology’ in the discourse of the Hungarian government and its corollaries attributes to gender a meaning of ‘independent of biological, sexed reality’, and fluid gender identities. The thus-far only related quantitative empirical analysis proves this too: sociologist Éva Fodor studied articles containing the word gender in three chosen months of three subsequent years (2018, 2019, 2020) in one of the self-proclaimed pro-government media outlets (*Magyar Idők* [*Hungarian Times*], later renamed *Magyar Nemzet* [*Hungarian Nation*]), and found that ‘gender ideology’ means transgender to them (Fodor, 2022, p. 19).

4 The individualist shift in the meaning of gender

The right-wing anti-gender actors attribute to the Istanbul Convention a gender definition that it does not have: that of a gender identity. However, while the Right distorts the definition of the Convention, why their accusation may sound credible is because they indeed refer to an actually existing trend that needs to be examined more closely, and deserves critique.

I am not intending in this subchapter to take stock of several decades of debates within gender studies about what gender is, and what it should be, or to assess the path of the concept from grammar to sexology to functionalism to feminist theorizing, including its Butlerist turn (cf. Olson, 2012; Repo, 2015; Risman et al., 2019; Stock, 2021, and many others). What I am interested in here is how – partly connected to gender studies debates, partly in relation to activism and policy-making – these debates play out in political terms.

I claim that there is not only a wide range of meanings attached to gender (Olson, 2012; Scott, 2013; Stock, 2019), which is already a challenge in itself for policymaking, but also that there has been a shift in meaning that has moved in the direction from structural to individual – a shift that neatly fits the neoliberal age.

In contrast to the above-quoted gender definition of the Istanbul Convention, in more and more LGBT sensitizing materials gender is defined as gender identity: ‘an individual’s deeply felt internal individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth’ (Yogyakarta, 2007, p. 6).

A telling example of this shift can be found in educational material by the Trevor Project, (a US-based LGBTQ NGO), which during the Rowling controversy in June 2020 was – with the active involvement of *Harry Potter* actor Daniel Radcliffe¹⁰ – widely circulated, including by gender-studies scholars. This material defines gender as follows:

Gender describes our internal understanding and experience of our own gender identity. Each person’s experience of their gender identity is unique and personal, and cannot be known simply by looking at a person. Common genders include: [cisgender, transgender, nonbinary, two-spirit – here, definitions are provided]. (Trevor Project, p. 3).

This is clearly not the gender definition of the Istanbul Convention, concerning the power structures in a given society associated with men and women, and the societal roles, possibilities, and constraints accrued from being born either male or female. Even academic articles repeat this individualist definition – e.g., ‘gender refers to a person’s felt sense of identity and expression’ (Green, 2006, p. 247; for a systematic analysis of these cf. Risman et al., 2018).

But it is not only widely circulated LGBT materials that use this approach: more and more EU documents are going in this direction too (Kováts & Zacharenko, 2021). An example of this mixing of sex, gender, and gender identity is the new gender equality strategy of the European Commission, presented in March 2020, for the period 2020–2025. While talking in the strategy about ‘women and men, girls and boys’, it is always added that they are, ‘in all their diversity, equal’. Besides the intersectional approach of the strategy, this addition refers to gender identity too: ‘where women or men are mentioned, these are a heterogeneous categories [*sic*] including in relation to their sex, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics) (European Commission 2020, p. 2).

What we can observe is that a definitional and ideological debate is being played out in the European polity. It is no longer confined to gender studies journals or activist subcultures, but these debates are taking place on national and European levels (Kováts & Zacharenko, 2021). And this polysemy of gender – i.e. partly a shift from a (classical) feminist and social science structural approach towards a queer feminist/transfeminist and growingly individualist approach – is what is instrumentalized by the right-wing to render any feminist claims suspicious. In the following I assess this trend in light of the critical feminist literature.

5 Neoliberal tendencies in feminism and the individualisation of structural critique

‘There are no *pure theories* or *pure ideas*; they are not borne out of thin air without a spatial or temporal foundation’ (Čakardić, 2017, p. 33). Čakardić formulates a basic claim about the critical theory of knowledge: that knowledge and ideas are not free-floating; they are also products of their time, shaped by them, and even prone to legitimizing unequal status quos.

¹⁰ <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/2020/06/08/daniel-radcliffe-responds-to-j-k-rowlings-tweets-on-gender-identity/>

In the same vein, their critical or emancipatory character cannot be solely decided upon their own claims – this requires serious reflection and self-reflection, and emancipatory claims can be incorporated into exploitative systems and ideologies at later points in time (Agostinone-Wilson, 2010; Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; Fraser, 2009; Soiland, 2017). Feminist and leftist claims, languages, interpretations of the causes of inequalities, and the transformations thereof are also founded in their times and conditioned by the broader political-economic relations they are embedded in. There is a vast feminist critique of the ideology that underpins the current form of global capitalism, including of its co-optations of feminist claims in what critiques term ‘neoliberal feminism’ or postfeminism (Gill, 2007; Budgeon, 2015; Čakardić, 2017; Rottenberg, 2014; Fraser, 2017; Soiland, 2011; 2017).

The ideological character can be described as follows:

[B]esides having an influence over economics and politics, neoliberalism also shapes *social values and culture*. By introducing and promoting the abovementioned economic and political practices it serves as a reference point for notions of values in everyday life, relations in personal interactions, ideas about different social groups and their behaviour. By promoting heavy individualism, it overstates the importance and responsibility of individual decisions on someone’s social position within the existing unequal social structure, without problematizing the structural oppression within the system itself. (Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016, pp. 11–12)

The issue described here – the ‘extension of market principles to ever wider spheres of social institutions and relations’ (Budgeon, 2015, p. 304) – is what is at stake here.

Feminist theoreticians critical of current discourses criticize the fact that ‘[t]he free choice ideology dictates that any time a woman makes a choice, it is an act of feminism’ (Čakardić 2017, p. 38). This also means that an old feminist claim is now resignified in neoliberal terms in the name of free choice. And by that, certain questions are excluded from legitimate scrutinization. Budgeon problematizes this as it forbids reconnecting individual experiences to the structures they are embedded in and assumes an authenticity that cannot be assumed: our individual claims and the subjectivation processes of our experiences and identities are shaped by the structures we are part of. ‘As long as women’s choices continue to be made under conditions of oppression and exploitation the reliability of individual choice as a guarantor of freedom is open to debate’ (Budgeon, 2015, p. 308).

This explains why the graffiti with which I illustrated the current trend that disallows any questioning of authenticity is problematic. What Budgeon suggests is carefully analysing ‘the slippage choice feminism makes when conflating “critique” with “disrespect” or “agency” with socially transformative “resistance”’ (ibid., 309).

Čakardić carries out an analysis of this shift of the meaning of free choice, agency, and authenticity using the example of women’s entrepreneurship (Čakardić, 2017). I apply her and Budgeon’s approach and tools to analyse the change in the term ‘gender’ itself, based on similar critiques formulated by others (Brubaker, 2016; Hajdú, 2016; Linkerhand, 2017; Mészáros, 2017; Risman et al., 2019; Salonas, 2018).

My line of argumentation will evolve around the concept of individualisation: the trend towards individualism. This process has been the consequence of social changes enacted by neoliberalism over the past twenty to thirty years in Europe by which individuals are increasingly expected to construct their own lives and own identities, which has far-reaching consequences for social theory too: it entails the individualisation of structural analyses and structural struggles.

That the individualist trend has affected feminism is not considered a new phenomenon, and nor is the critique of it. As early as in 1999 Martha Nussbaum formulated in her fierce critique of Judith Butler that what Butler proposes is a defeatist strategy that gives up on changing structures of power:

The new feminism, moreover, instructs its members that there is little room for large-scale social change, and maybe no room at all. We are all, more or less, prisoners of the structures of power that have defined our identity as women; we can never change those structures in a large-scale way, and we can never escape from them. All that we can hope to do is to find spaces within the structures of power in which to parody them, to poke fun at them, to transgress them in speech. And so symbolic verbal politics, in addition to being offered as a type of real politics, is held to be the only politics that is really possible. [...] Deprived of the hope of larger or more lasting changes, we can still perform our resistance by the reworking of verbal categories, and thus, at the margins, of the selves who are constituted by them. (Nussbaum, 1999).

This critique relates the individualist turn to postmodern theories, also outside of feminism:

The instability of the postmodern subject and the floating signifier of power leaves no alternative but to locate meanings within the individual, rather than to external, structural entities. [...] Contemporary culture, assisted by postmodernism, tends to recast structural problems requiring collective solutions into private ones solved only on an individual basis [...]. Larger problems like racism are separated from their historical and institutional foundations and translated into existing 'within' people, composing the simplistic equation of racism = power + prejudice (Bourne, 2002). (Agostinone-Wilson, 2010, pp. 144–145)

Besides a critique of postmodernism as renouncing structural critique (see for feminism also Olson, 2012; Soiland, 2008; 2011; 2017), the shifts around the term 'gender' started to be thematized in critical social science scholarship too.

Rogers Brubaker's volume *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* succinctly describes the change from how we used to understand and how we currently understand race and gender (Brubaker, 2016). His main argument concerning gender is the following: the proliferation of gender identities does not just recognize hitherto unnamed realities and identities, but also produces and contributes to them in a self-reinforcing manner. Here, he discusses the relationship between materiality (of the sexed body and the body of different skin colours) and social constructedness:

Morphological, physiological and hormonal differences between the sexes [...] are biologically real and socially consequential. Nothing remotely analogous can be said about racial divisions. Genetically governed differences between socially defined racial categories are superficial and inconsequential; genetically programmed differences between the sexes are neither. Like race, sex is a system of social classification. Unlike race, however, sex is also a well-established biological category.¹¹ But despite the evident biological basis of sex differences – a biological basis that is utterly lacking for racial differences – it is more socially legitimate to choose and change one's sex (and gender) than to choose and change one's race. (Brubaker, 2016, p. 135).

¹¹ Here, Brubaker includes a lengthy footnote about the acknowledgement of intersex people, while highlighting that 'the fact that certain individuals can be assigned to the categories male or female only arbitrarily does not make the categories themselves arbitrary; and the fact that sex is culturally co-constructed does not mean it is biologically unfounded' (p. 135).

And he analyses the relationship between materiality/construction using the concept of gender identity itself:

[W]hile gender identity is understood as independent of the visible morphological features of the sexed body, it is at the same time widely understood as grounded in other – and yet unknown – properties of the body. Gender identity is [...] understood both as a subjective inner essence, accessible to and knowable by the individual, and as an objective constitutional fact over which the individual has no control. The subjectivity of gender identity is seen as grounded in the objectivity of the body. [...] The putative objectivity of the subjectivity allows choice to be defended in the name of the unchosen and change to be legitimized in the name of the unchanging. [...] [I]nstead of imagining the sexed body as an unchosen and unchanging substrate and gender identity as its expression, one can now imagine gender identity as an unchosen, unchanging inner essence and the sexed body as its choosable and changeable expression. (Brubaker, 2016, pp. 136–137)

To put it differently: ‘In our technologically sophisticated society, bodies seem more malleable than selves’ (Risman et al., 2019, p. 184).

While occasionally recalling the growing significance of individualism, ‘the climate of subjectivism’ (Brubaker, 2016, p. 24), and the idea that ‘the enlargement of choice [...] does not simply respond to this unsettling [of basic categories]; it also contributes to it’ (ibid., 50), Brubaker does not systematically analyse why these changes took place initially. I think this must be accounted for in order to adequately assess the situation. I situate these changes in line with those authors who highlight the individualization of structural struggles within feminism and beyond (Budgeon, 2015; Čakardić, 2017; Linkerhand, 2017; Risman et al., 2019; Salonas, 2018; Soiland, 2008).

Thematizing the specific oppression that certain groups experience based on their sex, race, and sexuality is crucial, and we cannot underestimate the significance of the related activism of the 1960s–80s in the countries of the West. But these emancipatory developments were accompanied and co-opted by neoliberal tendencies (e.g., Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Budgeon, 2015; Fraser, 2016) that fostered an individualist resignification of hitherto critical terms. ‘These liberal-individualist understandings of “progress” gradually replaced the more expansive, anti-hierarchical, egalitarian, class-sensitive, anti-capitalist understandings of emancipation that had flourished in the 1960s and 1970s’ (Fraser, 2016, p. 282).

The best example of this is classism. Class analysis – to put it simply – is aimed at explaining how a specific mode of production or market leads to a specific mode of division of labour with different and contradictory positions. Furthermore, it is aimed at analysing wide-ranging levels of power and the capacity to defend the interests of people in related positions. However, within the individualized approach exemplified by the term classism, class has become but another identity category on the basis of which people are discriminated against. Turning class positions into characteristics of certain groups of people empties out class analysis of its original, structural sense, turning it instead into an analysis of the discrimination of individuals (Soiland, 2008).

I see the change in the meaning of the concept of gender and the proliferation of non-binary gender identities in the same context as the shift in the meaning of class: the replacement of the analysis of gendered structural circumstances and exploitations by a critique of cultural norms of differentiation (Soiland, 2011). A politics that defines gender as identity is not fighting narrowly defined gendered expectations towards men and women and the system which sustains them; instead, it suggests that if one does not comply with

the expectations associated with a particular sex, then one does not belong to that sex (that is, one belongs to the opposite sex or is non-binary) (Reilly-Cooper, 2016; Stock, 2021). In line with the discursive turn in social sciences (that has trickled down to activism), instead of treating categories as instruments to articulate inequalities, it sees the categories themselves as sources of oppression (Soiland, 2008; 2017). Hence, it does not pursue changing the system, but promoting individual solutions to systemic forms of oppression: switching between categories or creating new ones (Salonas, 2018). Thus in the context of how hopeless the endeavour seems to be to ‘crack the gender structure’, it might seem subversive and liberating to fight against being put into the box of ‘man’ or ‘woman’. This approach individualizes structural problems and provides a system-conforming framework of interpretation.

Gender – since it was taken over from functionalist theories into feminist social science – used to denote ‘the fundamentally social quality of distinctions based on sex’ (Scott, 1986); the power structures in a given society between men and women, and the differential opportunities and constraints accrued from being born either male or female. The shift in the meaning of gender, mediated through the poststructuralist Butlerian turn that problematized the constructedness of sex too, is apparent in much of the current trans and gender-queer scholarship and activism and in European polity (Kováts & Zacharenko, 2021), and is increasingly becoming conceptually synonymous with gender identity, a person’s felt sense of identity. Gender in this sense means identifying (or not) with being born male or female, and of having the privilege (or not) of correspondence between one’s ‘sex assigned at birth’ and ‘felt sense of gender identity’. This second approach, however, has very little in common with the critique of the hierarchical social structures between men and women.

Also, it blurs the fact that the gendered oppression we observe today is not a response to our identities but to how society identifies us (and, say, gives lower pay to women, or expose them to specific forms of violence – independent of their self-assigned ‘gender identity’ cf. Reilly-Cooper 2016¹²); ‘were we to rely on a neoliberal analytical framework, we would fail to examine the structural consequences of gender. The gender structure bifurcates and stratifies people as women and men regardless of whether or not they self-identify as such’ (Risman et al., 2018, p. 183).

There remain inequalities in a material sense that are not there because of categorizations, hence cannot be remedied by linguistic strategies (Nussbaum, 1999; Olson, 2012; Soiland, 2011; 2017). Not only does this individualized approach not pose any challenge to the neoliberal order, but its culturalist, depoliticized and postmaterialist focus is tailored neatly to the requirements of post-Fordist accumulation regimes (Barna et al., 2017; Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; Fraser, 2009; Soiland, 2011; 2017).

Linkerhand formulates it like this:

The neoliberal idea of freedom requires every individual to pick her very individual identity ticket from the colourful pot of possibilities and to take it to the market. Queer feminism takes over this ticket mentality: Gender, sexuality and desire seem to be made comprehensible only in forms of identities, not as product of societal relations that are almost unescapable, but can be criticized. (Linkerhand, 2017, pp. 56–57)

¹² [Y]ou can’t slip through the bars. No amount of calling myself “agender” will stop the world seeing me as a woman, and treating me accordingly. I can introduce myself as agender and insist upon my own set of neo-pronouns when I apply for a job, but it won’t stop the interviewer seeing a potential baby-maker, and giving the position to the less qualified but less encumbered by reproduction male candidate’ (Reilly-Cooper, 2016).

To my knowledge, reflection on this within gender studies has been quite recent; I here reconstruct the arguments presented by Barbara Risman, Kristen Myers, and Ray Sin.

Risman and her colleagues observe this neoliberal 'shift toward individualizing social problems as personal responsibilities and choices' (Risman et al., 2019, p. 186) in the field of gender studies. In their text *Limitations of the Neoliberal Turn in Gender Theory – (Re)Turning to Gender as a Social Structure* they analyse, based on empirical research, among other things the recent trends in the sociological scholarship of gender; and the fact that it occurs more and more often that instead of integrating structure and practice, and co-constructing individuals and society, scholars situate gender as individual identity or strategy with little attention to gender inequality. The authors attribute this turn to 'an unreflexive importation of neoliberal thought into the study of gender that is problematic both as an analytic strategy and as an effective collective feminist project to eradicate gender inequalities' (ibid., 180). Similarly to Brubaker they formulate that: 'the increasing focus on diversity of gender identities and performances without linking them back to the social structure may have the unintended consequence of essentializing femininity and masculinity within the body' (ibid.).

Risman and her colleagues call for breaking the silence of social scientists in this regard: while it might be politically efficient to be silent about certain issues so as not to hamper the striving for equal rights for certain groups, at least within social science these debates should be carried out – for instance, about the 'born this way' claim (frequently deployed in the gay and lesbian movements) imported to the debate about gender.

[M]uch research in social science shows that biological determinants explain a small variance of gendered responses and identities [...]. To the extent that we uncritically accept the essential need to be masculine or feminine as biologically 'authentic,' we support individuals' right to self-determination. But to do so as social scientists requires us to ignore what is at the moment the state of the art social scientific evidence. [...] To remain silent in a political movement may be efficacious, but social scientists have not remained silent about the social construction of sexual identities within the social scientific community. We fear the silencing of social science in the face of the rhetoric of a new essentialist gender binary (cis/trans). (Risman et al., 2019, p. 182)

Observing the scholarly debates about these issues, this fear does seem founded. Many people indeed refrain from bringing up certain issues that would offend sensibilities, and that are judged by their political utility, not according to scientific criteria (Speck & Villa, 2020). A trend to silencing can be interpreted as an indicator of hegemony. What Rosalind Gill observes for postfeminism (that this neoliberal sensibility has become ever more difficult to criticize it so much appears as common sense) can be applied to the critique of gender as an identity.

Risman and her colleagues clearly connect this turn within gender studies – just as theoreticians who critically analyse feminism and the term gender itself do – to neoliberal ideology.

Within a neoliberal framework, attention is narrowed to the 'choice' of individuals with less attention to the governmental and other social-structural explanations for social life. Neoliberalism is in the intellectual air we breathe in the 21st century. In a world with increasingly fewer unions or pensions or stable employment contracts, the individual managing his or her own trajectory has become routine. Individuals are responsible for choosing everything from religious denominations to health care plans to identities. We suggest this individualist focus has been imported into the study of gender. This is problematic both as an analytic strategy and for a collective feminist project to eradicate gender inequalities. (Ibid., 184)

6 Linking the anti-gender rhetoric to the individualist changes in gender analysis

In the political realm there are at least four understandings of how sex and gender are related:¹³

1. Sex as synonymous with gender, so as to avoid associations with sexual intercourse (Case, 1995, cf. Scott, 2013; Stock, 2019)
2. The conservative view: there are only biological sexes and how women and men are to be follows from this; there are two sets of repertoires based on the ahistorical, ontological, and anthropological difference between men and women (in this sense, both sex and gender are binary, and biological sex leads to adequate gender roles).
3. The constructivist view: sex is given (either male or female, although admitting very few intersex people, which does not challenge the claim of sexual dimorphism); however, gender (= gendered expectations towards men and women) is historically constructed, hence being born male or female should not determine chances and constraints in life (i.e., sex is binary; gender roles should not be) (Istanbul Convention).
4. The poststructuralist view: sex cannot be clearly separated from gender; there is no pre-discursive and fixed biological dualism; both sex and gender are fluid; biological sex cannot be read from the body but is only an interpretation of it and is arbitrarily assigned at birth; accordingly, subjective identities are better and fairer indicators of whether the gender of a person is man, woman, or something else. Gender in this sense means gender identity.¹⁴

What I have tried to show in this paper is that there are various meanings of gender out there in the political arena, and that the main playground on the progressive side concerns the shift between definitions 3. and 4. – i.e., not only towards poststructuralism, but embedded in the neoliberal shift: from structural towards individual. This shift can be and is criticized from various angles, not only from the Right. What the anti-gender Right is doing is equating definitions no. 3. and 4. or saying that no. 3. is a Trojan horse for no. 4.

Right-wing actors who connect ‘gender’ and individualism/neoliberalism base their claim on the individualized understanding of the concept of gender. While I do not believe that the right-wing anti-gender political actors are truly interested in theoretical nuances and disentangling complexities, or that they would accept the constructivist notion (no. 3.), what merits scrutiny, however, is *why* their discursive strategy of equating definitions no. 3. and 4. resonates with a large part of their electorates and constituencies. What I have tried to show in this paper is – and this is my tentative explanation for their resonance – that it resonates because it refers to actually existing trends: trends that can be and are criticized not only from a right-wing perspective but in critiques of feminist ideology critique too.

¹³ Not to mention in policymaking wherein ‘gender’ or ‘gender perspective’ only mean ‘women’s issues’, or how a particular measure affects women; see Kováts (2018b).

¹⁴ Judith Butler originally presents a much more sophisticated argument, emphasising the coercive character of gender, and opposing the voluntaristic interpretations. ‘For if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night’ (1993, ix). What I have briefly described under Point 4 is the current individualist activist claim, an interpretation or specific adaptation of poststructuralist gender theories – what Butler endorses in her recent opinion pieces.

Although right-wing anti-gender actors pursue wider goals (in the case of Hungary for instance, a new hegemony, and a new relationship between state and society, state and science, etc.), in this particular case of vilifying gender, it is these actual individualist trends that make the right-wing accusations ‘empirically credible’ (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 620).

So, while for instance the Istanbul Convention does not contain the individualist definition it is accused of, other European and political documents do, and some even lump the constructivist and the individualist/ poststructuralist definition together as if they were synonymous. This makes the right-wing ‘Trojan-Horse’ framing credible: namely, that if one speaks about gender stereotypes, then the next step would be for children to be encouraged to question their gender (in terms of gender identity).

Lombardo and her colleagues differentiate (2009) four processes concerning how discourse on the meaning of gender equality is formed: fixing a meaning (establishing it, albeit temporarily), shrinking it (e.g., to mean only non-discrimination on a legal basis), stretching it (broadening the meaning to include other – e.g. intersectional – understandings) and bending it (towards other goals than gender equality ‘to make it fit some other goal than the achievement of gender equality itself’; Lombardo et al., 2009, p. 109): for example, towards economic or demographic goals (Repo, 2016). One can currently observe a process – a discursive struggle – which involves a possibly hegemonic fight to fix the meaning of gender equality in the poststructuralist sense of the concept (Kováts & Zacharenko, 2021). This is both a shrinking and a stretching of the concept. A shrinking in a sense that the complex and structural meaning of gender is reduced to its application to subjectivities/identities. It is also a stretching in a sense that it attempts to include into the term gender equality the ‘equality of all genders’. This seems to be part of a conscious lobbying strategy by actors invested in trans and queer rights, and partly due to an unseen bias generated by the hegemonic discourse: the imperative of the rainbow coalition further accentuated by the strengthening of the right (Kováts, 2018a).

7 Conclusion

Whether there is causality between this shift in meanings and right-wing resistance requires empirical verification. What seems to be clear, however, is that the empirical credibility of the anti-gender accusations of individually chosen genders and the Trojan-horse manoeuvre seem to be grounded in the fact that they have a referent in material life: in the documents and political claims of certain strands of feminism and academia.

What I have tried to demonstrate is that, in light of this polysemy and even shift in the meaning of gender, one cannot simply say that right-wing accusations against gender do ‘not capture the current state of art of gender scholarship’ (Havelková, 2020, p. 439). And this is the case not because it would be a misunderstanding or a misrepresentation, but rather because they explore and instrumentalize an actually existing – and critiquable – phenomenon.

Hence the dominant culturalist, simplistic, binary interpretation of the anti-gender phenomenon as being a cultural clash between progressives vs conservatives is misleading. First, this interpretation ignores the plurality of positions and the structural background of societal changes that extend beyond attitudes. Second, it willingly or unwittingly pursues a political fight disguised as an intellectual enquiry, whereby someone not sharing the individualist view is accused of being culturally backward, denying individual autonomy, or rallying with the Right.

But the analysis and critical assessment of these changes is important not only for generating a better understanding of the Right. Ignoring the shift, or celebrating it due to the illusion of a conflict-free plurality, obfuscates the political-economic stakes. In failing to address the structural roots of inequalities, the individualist approach is not only analytically wrong, but by insisting on individuality and on the unquestionability of authenticity, it tabooizes structural enquiry.

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