Gender Studies in Exile

Workshop Report

Von: Egemen Özbek

On November 9, 2020, Academy in Exile (AiE) held the Gender Studies in Exile Workshop hosted by the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI) in Essen. Organized by AiE fellow Judit Takács and AiE council member Volker Heins, the workshop brought together scholars working in gender and queer studies. Workshop contributors detailed the current attacks on gender and queer studies by authoritarian regimes in Hungary, Turkey, Poland, and Russia. They also strategized about ways in which this clampdown might be resisted.

Andrea Pető, drawing on the example of Central European University's expulsion from Hungary and the closing of an accredited gender studies graduate program, invoked a "polypore academia", undermining academic authority and eroding intellectual freedom in Hungary and elsewhere. The concept derives from the notion of a "polypore state", which, according to Pető, characterizes present-day governance in Hungary and constitutes a peculiar form of illiberal democracy. The biological term "polypore" (bracket fungi) is used metaphorically to define the relation between the current regime and the previous liberal democratic government. Just like the polypore fungus which parasitizes trees and consumes their wood, the current government consumes the resources of prior liberal democratic structures to construct a dependent state form.¹ This new state form functions through parallel organizations, national security narratives, and ideologies such as familialism, an ideology that prioritizes the family. Polypore academia, Pető argued, operates in a similar fashion and has detrimental effects on fields like gender studies which question the traditional order. Provocatively, Pető suggested that current scholar rescue initiatives are not sufficiently equipped to deal with the insidious challenges posed by polypore academia.

Anikó Gregor drew attention to some of the local reasons for the political targeting of gender studies programs in Hungary. Critically engaging with gender as a globalized, traveling concept, removed from its specific history and presented as a standardized form of knowledge production, Gregor suggested that the history of “gender” as a concept employed in scholarly, activist, and policy discourses in Hungary has a bearing on the current attacks on gender. What is also important, she argued, is the history of the institutionalization of gender studies in Hungarian tertiary education. This history is entangled with global transformations of the field, as well as with local discourses on modernization.

Alexander Kondakov highlighted the fact that Russian social policy took a conservative turn between 2006 and 2008. This conservative turn had a detrimental impact on gender and queer studies. While there was no official ban on these fields, two pieces of legislation, the “Foreign Agent” Law of 2012 and the “Gay Propaganda” Law of 2013, were mobilized to create a hostile environment for scholars, activists, and human rights advocates. Kondakov also observed that Russian academia was divided on the gender and queer studies question. The division was evident even in the higher echelons of the tertiary education system, including the Russian Academy of Science, and paved the way for the policing of knowledge production. While regressive approaches were legitimized and amplified, progressive scholars were expelled or forced to self-censor. The closure of research centres and programs means that much of the institutional structure needed for gender and queer studies research has since been decimated.

Philipp Ayoub, presenting work co-authored with Agnes Chetaille, focused on the strategies the lesbian and gay (LG) movement employed in Poland in the past twenty years. Situating the movement within the broader discursive context of social movement studies, Ayoub investigated interactions between the LG movement and various counter-movements. He showed that these interactions can be exposed via the respective forms of representation used by either side to appeal to the Polish public sphere. In conclusion, Ayoub argued that the entanglement of external and local frames paved the way for the LG movement to pursue a strategy emphasizing the rootedness of their struggle in Polish history.

Olga Hünler spoke about the historical development of gender studies and its institutionalization in Turkey. Hünler argued that, despite the lack of adequate empirical research on gender studies centres and programs in Turkey, it is possible to point to a decline in numbers, as well as a transformation in the nature of these centres and programs, especially after the coup attempt in 2016. The authoritarian turn in Turkish politics has left its mark on gender studies as scholars were purged, and centres and programs evacuated. The result is a prevailing shift towards more conservative fields of research such as family studies, which tends to uphold the status quo.

The plenary discussion revealed the need for further reflection on a variety of issues. Issues that warrant further investigation include the anti-intellectual and anti-secular character of the attacks on gender and queer studies, and the growing ideology of familialism that is shaping gender-based policies devised by populist and authoritarian governments. Comparative studies could make a valuable contribution towards

documenting violations of academic freedom, and in terms of encapsulating the state of gender and queer studies in exile. Workshop participants concluded that Academy in Exile has taken an important first step in investigating these issues and that this should be elaborated through publications, teaching initiatives, and other scholarly outputs.

The workshop constituted the inaugural event of the Gender Studies Research Group of Academy in Exile at KWI. The research group will organize an international conference or author's workshop in 2021, preparatory to a publication. A Summer School for international graduate students is in planning as well. In countries like Hungary, Poland, Brazil, and Afghanistan where gender and queer studies are heavily censored, graduate students are unable to receive adequate supervision to complete their research. The 2023 summer school will allow graduate students to present their research and receive feedback from scholars established in the field. Members of AiE's Gender Studies Research Group, along with other scholars at risk, will be invited to teach in the Summer School.²

Workshop programme

References

1. Andrea Peto and Weronika Grzebalska, "How Hungary and Poland have silenced women and stifled human rights," *The Conversation*, Accessed on November 18, 2020. URL: <https://theconversation.com/how-hungary-and-poland-have-silenced-women-and-stifled-human-rights-66743>
2. I am grateful to Judit Takács and Volker Heins for their comments and to Vanessa Agnew, Sabine Voßkamp, and Sebastian Till Hartwig for their assistance in editing this blog post.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Özbek, Egemen: Gender Studies in Exile. Workshop Report, in: KWI-BLOG, [<https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/gender-studies-in-exile/>], 04.02.2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20210204-0830>

DuEPublico

Duisburg-Essen Publications online

Offen im Denken

Dieser Text wird über DuEPublico, dem Dokumenten- und Publikationsserver der Universität Duisburg-Essen, zur Verfügung gestellt. Die hier veröffentlichte Version der E-Publikation kann von einer eventuell ebenfalls veröffentlichten Verlagsversion abweichen.

DOI: 10.37189/kwi-blog/20210204-0830
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:464-20210204-084904-9

Alle Rechte vorbehalten.