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Women's/Gender studies and contemporary changes in academic cultures: European perspectives



The idea for the theme of this special issue emerged from our encounter with frequent and intense discussions at conferences, workshops and seminars about how the contemporary changes in academia affect our academic locations and everyday academic lives. Yet, although these changes and their diverse implications often were mentioned or referred to in the scheduled program at these various sites, we noticed that the richest and most significant analyses of these changes took place in between the scheduled sessions, through detailed accounts and vivid exchanges in breaks, in the hallways, around the coffee table. We found it crucial to make these debates the focus of the conversation, as the far-reaching transformation in higher education and scientific policy, against a broader backdrop of neoliberalization, precarization of labor, corporatization and commodification of education, not only have had significant impacts on scholarly practice and the learning/teaching experience, but have also affected the position and status of women's/gender/feminist studies in academia, often in ambivalent and complex ways.

For this reason, in 2010 we founded the international and interdisciplinary network "Genderact—academic cultures and transformation in European Gender Studies",¹ for which we received generous funding from the Swedish Riksbankens Jubileumsfond in order to regularly organize workshops in different European academic contexts that addressed the mentioned issues within the consecutive 3 years. The decision to publish this special issue of *Women's Studies International Forum* was one of the results of the discussions during these workshops. The issue, therefore, is devoted to contributions that analyze the impact of contemporary transformations on the life of academic feminism and the lives of feminist academics without neglecting continuities of repressions such as the hierarchical construction of differences that always valorize higher what is perceived and categorized as being of white male European and middle-class origin and often devalorize or exclude what is perceived and categorized as different from this origin.

It is crucial to see both because within the current changes these repressive mechanisms are partly enhanced. How for example, do feminist scholars negotiate increasingly stringent mechanisms of ranking and rating, structures of auditing and

quality control, and logics of individualization and metricization from an often already marginalized position within academia? What are the epistemic, political and ethical issues raised by the increased emphasis on publication productivity, impact and income-generation as criteria for the academic evaluation of scholars and institutions? And to what extent do these current changes shed new light on "old" debates within women's and gender studies – such as debates about the position of women's and gender studies vis-à-vis the academy and the "traditional" disciplines; or the opportunities and perils generated by the institutionalization of feminism? These are questions discussed in the contributions to this special issue, in diverse trajectories and from a range of geopolitical perspectives, by analyses of subjective experiences of guilt, injury and exclusion, and examinations of the contradictory effects of the shifts, and reproduction, of power in academia. Not only because we, as academics, ourselves take active part in these on-going transformations, but also because of the desire in feminist theory to identify dominant assumptions and patterns of inequality, as these give rise to experiences of marginalization, exclusion and violence, the questions discussed in this special issue take shape as questions of key importance for contemporary feminist knowledge production.

Feminist scholars seeking to navigate and intervene in this changing academic landscape face difficult challenges and new paradoxes. These take different forms in each regional, institutional and disciplinary context, but they raise a set of shared questions that are urgent and important to examine critically and collectively. Inspired by Gill's (2010) appeal to break the silence around these contemporary trends in academia, we hope that this special issue will contribute with a shift of perspective in relation to these issues. Instead of understanding expressions of anger, tiredness or anxiety as expressions of individual difficulties, failures, or complaints, we would like to emphasize the importance to understand these as entailing the potential for collective forms of resistance against the neoliberalization of universities, against the framing of productivity as the key goal in academia, and against the view on gender equality and diversity as 'overed' (as goals that have been reached) in today's academic landscapes. As such, the articles published in this special issue produce analyses that identify and examine complex

and contradictory effects of the neoliberalization of academic institutions, of the commodification of knowledge, of the precarization of academic labor and of the continued, albeit shifting, regimes of inequality and modalities of power in academic spaces. Yet, the articles in this special issue do not only define the complexities of the problems faced by academics today, but they also provide suggestions for, or examples of, resistance against it. In fact, we believe that (some) possibilities for change are inherent in these very critical perspectives and detailed analyses of the deep cynicism characterizing the audit cultures of the present academic landscape.

The first set of articles published in this special issue offers critical examinations of the contradictions characterizing women's/gender/feminist studies and/or the experiences of feminist academics in the entrepreneurial university. The entrepreneurial university is a university whose task is no longer to produce knowledge and good citizens, but to produce applicable knowledge to secure global competitiveness, as Sabine Hark points out in her contribution "Contending Directions. Gender Studies in the Entrepreneurial University". In her comprehensive discussion about the role of gender studies in this context, Hark demonstrates that gender studies scholars actively take part in shaping these transformations in academia and that feminism has become an entity that also functions to govern us (in national governments, or in the European Commission, for example). To this end, Hark investigates into the implications of this for women's/gender/feminist studies and offers an analysis of the contradictory nature of resistance. Here, she points at the precarious condition for change, as change always is dependent on participation, but a participation that questions, contests and challenges the dominant rules. That is, Hark explains, how a production of dissident knowledge(s) and collective strategies of resistance can lead to a dissolving of hegemonic social practices and a weakening of dominant forms of knowledge.

In a similar vein, Rosalind Gill and Ngaire Donaghue demonstrate in their article "Resilience, Apps and Reluctant Individualism: Technologies of Self in the Neoliberal Academy" that contemporary universities interpellate and constitute academics as ideal neoliberal subjects – hard-working, self-disciplining, entrepreneurial and responsabilized. In their article, however, Gill and Donaghue visualize how the expression of the 'hidden injuries of academia', that is, experiences of stress, exhaustion and anxiety, have changed in its character. From an earlier systematic silencing in official academic spaces, Gill and Donaghue show how these experiences now have become the subject of a variety of new spaces or services. Interested in analyzing these changes, they offer a rich and critical analysis of the emergent programs in the academic space for stress management: of the development of new apps designed for busy, overworked or stressed people; and of the expanding academic blogosphere, with its survival guides and 12 step programs. Gill and Donaghue identify some shared features of all of these emergent programs, pointing at their individualism, their psychological focus and their turning away from political and structural interventions towards increasing work on the self, by which, as the authors conclude, the psychic landscape of neoliberalism is reproduced in the very spaces and places that is meant to critically respond to these transformations.

Linked with these concerns, and more specifically with the individualized responses to these contemporary transformations in academia, Maria do Mar Pereira notes in her article "Struggling Within and Beyond the Performative University: Articulating Activism and Work in an 'Academia Without Walls'", that the increasing productivity demands have made it more difficult for scholars to engage in collective struggles for social justice. Yet, Pereira also emphasizes that some of the current transformations in academia have also created new possibilities for the development of politically engaged academic practices. Drawing on fieldwork from a Portuguese context, Pereira finds that the current trends in higher education policy in some instances create opportunities for scholars who wish to combine academic work with activism, through policies emphasizing the value of an engagement with communities and sectors outside of the academy, as long as, she underlines, academics produce and keep producing. Still, however, Pereira also notes the difficulties to realize these desires to care for the activist community, as the intensification and extensification of academic work ('academia without walls') make scholars too busy, too tired, or too overworked to be able to engage in activism. As the performative character of academic labor means that our work goals never can be reached, Pereira highlights the actual ineffectiveness and the danger that lurks in individual solutions and suggests that we need to spend less energy on adaptation and instead resist the framing of productivity as the key goal in academia, through the development of collective efforts to transform the conditions of work within and beyond academia.

From a slightly different angle, Aggeliki Sifaki's contribution to this special issue, "Which Side Are We On? Feminist Studies in the Time of Neoliberalism or Neoliberal Feminist Studies?", also finds that our situatedness within these corporatized institutions should not result in individualized responses or in paralysis. Investigating how the present neoliberalization affects feminist scholars materially and emotionally, and identifying the similarities between neoliberalism and Christian rituals, Sifaki shows how feelings of indebtedness and guilt have become internalized by academics, resulting in their gradual acceptance of neoliberalization and the new managerial policies. Hence, Sifaki suggests that our very location in these environments calls for the need of a collective political engagement, characterized by openness, sincerity and generosity, as a way to resist the dangerous individualism of neoliberalism.

The increased pressure on productivity and flexibility, the instrumental and capitalist systems through which knowledge production are measured and the implications of this on collaboration and relational aspects, to colleagues, to students, and the activist community, are often experienced by academics in terms of individual failure and resisted through individual solutions (Liinason, 2013). As Rosalind Gill writes in "Breaking the Silence" (2010): "Being hard-working, self-motivating and enterprising subjects is what constitute academics as so perfectly emblematic of this neoliberal moment, but is also part of a psychic landscape in which *not* being successful (or lucky!) (i.e. not being one in five who gets their research application funded, or the one in 15 whose paper is accepted for publication in the 'good' journal) is misrecognized – or to put that more neutrally, made knowable – in terms of individual (moral) failure." (Gill, 2010: 240).

Indeed, identifying the multifaceted and complex difficulties arising from this work on the self that makes academics, and especially feminist academics, ideal neoliberal subjects, the first set of articles to this special issue all emphasize the importance to develop collective spaces and strategies to resist these transformations. Since productivity, identified as the current key goal of academia, engender an objective that never will be reached, and individual solutions only function to redirect the problem, away from intolerable work demands to privatized anxieties (Gill, 2010: 237), these are important suggestions that function to challenge neoliberalism at its core. Certainly, the fact that the effects of neoliberalism are so deeply subjective, also highlight the need for a rethinking of our strategies. As Sara Motta explains, we need to restructure our understanding of resistance: “If the violence of neoliberal capitalism is so intensely subjective, if it works through the separation and commodification of the multiple elements of our being and humanity then it suggests that our resistance can be/is on multiple planes – the intellectual, affective, embodied, cultural, historical and spiritual. Thus we need to look beyond participation in a march or a meeting to see resistance, dignity and attempts to (re)constitute collectivity, commons and subjectivity.” (Motta, 2012: 3).

The second set of articles to this special issue, in return, highlights the de-politicization, fatigue and ambivalence that seems to characterize much debates around gender and diversity in neoliberal academia in distinct geopolitical settings – around questions of institutionalization, equality and diversity programs, interdisciplinary modes of working and the persistent lack of challenges of the feminized and racialized division of work.

In “Resisting ‘Overing’: Teaching and Researching Gender Studies in Sweden”, Siv Fahlgren, Katarina Giritli-Nygren and Angelica Sjöstedt Landén explore some of the challenges gender studies’ scholars experience in Sweden today, located in what they describe as ‘overed’ landscapes. Drawing on autobiographical narratives, the authors study the conditions of possibility for gender studies scholars to work for diversity and equal opportunities in academic organizations that are imbued by the idea that equality is already achieved, that is, it is seen as ‘overed’. In contrast to the widespread discourse in Sweden, in which equality is understood as already achieved, the authors here initiate a discussion about the need for new and critical understandings of the role of gender studies. Discussing how these new challenges that feminism faces in the academy as well as the wider society are related to the individualization of neoliberalism as well as to the growing popularity of right wing extremism’s racism and antifeminism, the authors suggest that the inclusion of gender studies as an academic subject area, in this context and at this point in time, provides opportunities for change, but also make gender studies scholars particularly vulnerable to changing political trends. By way of conclusion, Fahlgren, Giritli-Nygren and Sjöstedt Landén call for the need of more knowledge around how such challenges work in differently located settings and for more critical analyses of their diverse implications for feminists and scholars.

Also highlighting the importance of contextualized and situated analyses, Biljana Kašić argues for a “geopolitics of knowledge” in her article ‘Unsettling’ Women’s Studies,

Settling Neoliberal Threats in the Academia: A Feminist Gaze from Croatia”. Kašić suggests that a geopolitical starting point enables the shift from western universalism to a contextualized and situated pluralism, as all knowledge is produced through complex subjective and collective experiences in located, often conflicted, histories. By a mapping of the pressing but often hidden effects of neoliberalism’s rationality in Croatian academia, Kašić shows that the increasing rise of neoliberalism has influenced the already complex and ambiguous position of feminist agency in this context. In her critical analysis, she discusses how neoliberalism has reconstituted and repositioned feminist scholarship in normative directions, how it has impacted negatively on interdisciplinarity and how it has de-politicized sex/gender issues. These are transformations that, Kašić concludes, that demand our critical strategies and full attention.

In a related vein, emphasizing the importance of practices, activities, skills and mutual communication for the emergence and continued development of women’s/gender studies, Päivi Korvajärvi and Jaana Vuori outline the local activities and interdisciplinary implications following from the institutionalization of women’s/gender studies at their university in Finland from the early 1980s until the early 2000s, in their article “A Classroom of Our Own: Transforming Interdisciplinarity Locally”. Drawing on autobiographical accounts, the authors use the notion ‘communities of practice’ to underline the importance of a conceptualization of communities brought together by shared interests, rather than shared institutional or formal positions, for an understanding of the institutionalization of women’s/gender studies in this context. At first, illuminating that the process of institutionalizing the autonomous subject area at this university in Finland has been characterized by both resistance and adaptation to the existing academic environment, the authors point at the continued importance of developing local communities of practice, for the subject area to be able to address urgent issues in teaching gender and sexualities. Also, in times characterized by organizational turbulence and frequent shifts in higher education policies, the authors emphasize the importance, for women’s/gender studies, of close links to national and transnational networks. Secondly, the authors discuss the production and reproduction of particular interdisciplinary practices in this context, which, as the authors show, have been characterized by shifting understandings that has served to keep the community together and established a solid basis for a joint transdisciplinary identity in the subject area.

In their understanding of academic institutions as “toxic” workplaces (Gill, 2010: 239), feminist scholars have highlighted how the continuation of inequality patterns alongside class, race, dis/ability, sexuality, age and gender (Acker, 2006) in contemporary academia is reproduced in complex and ambivalent ways (Liinason, 2014). While these experiences may differ across or within institutions, the redefinition of academic labor under neoliberalism contributes to “the restoration of institutional cultures in which masculine domination is normalised and celebrated, and certain forms of femininity and non-hegemonic masculinity are suppressed or treated as professional problems and investment risks”, as Sara Amsler (2014: 2) defines the shifting modalities of power in the academy of today. In this context, the form and function of gender equality policies and diversity management at

institutions of higher education take shape as a particularly salient issue, which Uta Klein discusses in her article "Gender Equality and Diversity Politics in Higher Education: Conflicts, Challenges and Requirements for Collaboration". Situated in a German context, Klein's article illuminates the tensions that characterize the contemporary relationship between gender equality policies and diversity management. Emphasizing the different connections, in these two approaches, to educational policies, institutional, national and scientific histories, Klein analyzes the complex effects of these differences in her piece and suggests the need for a careful rethinking of both approaches: while gender equality, according to Klein, urgently needs to take intersectionality into account, diversity management would benefit greatly from incorporating, in affinity to gender equality policies, a normative vision of equity instead of maintaining its current emphasis on surplus value.

In analyses of the shifting forms of power in contemporary academia, women's positions and positionings take shape as particularly complex, as Kairi Talves investigates in her contribution to this special issue. In her article "Discursive Self-positioning Strategies of Estonian Female Scientists in Terms of Academic Career and Excellence", Talves studies self-positioning strategies deployed by Estonian women scientists and identify three strategies, all of which draw on a reproduction of individual responsibility serving to maintain/reproduce the gendered hierarchical structures of the academy. Demonstrating how women's self-positioning strategies ranges from strategies of gender neutrality, over strategies of trivialization of own achievements, to the enactment of superiority over other women, Talves' article contributes to highlight the multiplicity of power mechanisms that reinforce gendered cultures in the academy, as these reproduce individual responsibility that functions to sustain academic hierarchical structures.

Expanding the analysis about inequality patterns in universities to include not only the feminized, but also the racialized division of work in academia, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez takes the opportunity to study institutional racism and migration policies in the context of the neoliberal university in her article "Sensing Dispossession: Women and Gender Studies Between Institutional Racism and Migration Control Policies in the Neoliberal University". By an analysis of the underrepresentation of black, ethnic minority, people of color and post/migrant scholars in British and German universities, as well as of the institutional and affective impact of migration control policies in these contexts, Gutiérrez Rodríguez discusses how the negotiations around austerity measures and public spending cuts reveal the ideological dimension of universities as reflecting inherent social inequalities within the nation state. Here, in accordance with Siv Fahlgren, Katarina Giritli-Nygren and Angelica Sjöstedt Landén, Gutiérrez Rodríguez points out how the rhetoric of diversity at universities declares that it has overcome racism, but she shows that this rhetoric is made possible only because of a silencing of ordinary experiences of racism. By contrast, Gutiérrez Rodríguez discusses the system of differentiation that students and teachers encounter in these contexts, enacted by universities through a diverse set of technologies defining residency status, legal and/or cultural belonging to the nation. Therefore, Gutiérrez Rodríguez importantly suggests that the critic of the neoliberal university needs to

be attentive not only to mere economic questions, demands on productivity or forms of individualization, but also to reconfigurations of institutional racism.

Against the backdrop of the analyses in this special issue, that identifies the reproduction of inequality patterns in altered configurations, and examines the proliferation of injury and marginalization in academic contexts, the impact of the changed forms of academic labor is defined in the contributions to this special issue as having a significant impact on knowledge production, on our bodies and health, subjectivities, relationships and communities. Although these transformations also open up new trajectories (to engage in activism, or to institutionalize women's/gender studies, for example), we would like to take the opportunity to encourage multiple and diverse forms of resistance against their negative outcomes as well as creative ways of engagement with the context in which we all work. One such form of engagement is to re-articulate the relationship between subjectivity, social situations and the feminist/critical community, as Sara Motta suggests: "we can find resistance, dignity and political subjectivity in many unexpected places, situations, acts and emotions. We can find it when we listen and speak to each other in the corridor at work, when we offer support when a colleague has problems with childcare or money. We find it when we create spaces of otherness such as when we cook and eat together and share our histories and desires over a bottle of wine" (2012: 3). Or, to give another example, as a group of scholars attending a conference hosted by the Centre for Science and Technology Studies at Leiden University decided to do, after having watched "with increasing alarm the pervasive misapplication of indicators to the evaluation of scientific performance" (Hicks et al., 2015: 430), this group of scholars decided to publish the Leiden Manifesto, listing ten useful principles to guide research evaluation.²

Finally, in the reconstitution of multiple forms of resistance, feminist theory's critical tools and care for the community are invaluable. As Sara Amsler suggests: "there is a need ... to reflect again on the conditions of feminism's emergence as a militant and creative response to experiences of silencing, marginalization, exclusion and violence. There is much to learn from the women whose work catalysed the creation of radically autonomous knowledges and practices in situations where the creation of conditions of these possibilities was itself repressed. The writings of Patricia Hill Collins, Adrienne Rich, Gloria Anzaldúa and others open windows onto the importance of practices of self-valorization, oppositional consciousness and collective solidarity in political struggle within institutions of knowledge production and higher education." (2014: 3)

Endnotes

¹ See <https://www.gender.hu-berlin.de/internationales/projekte/generationstransmission> (18 May 2015).

² Cf. <http://www.nature.com/news/bibliometrics-the-leiden-manifesto-for-research-metrics-1.17351>.

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