

DISCUSSION

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Feminism and Gender Studies dismantled? Critical Reflections on the Occasion of the 650th Jubilee of Vienna University

Since the beginning of 2015, a series of articles, interviews, and comments were propagated in the media about the struggle for the Eva Kreisky chair on Political Theory at the University of Vienna, and the precarious situation of feminist theory in the academia. In an interview, published on the 8th of March, 2015, in the Austrian newspaper *Die Standard* – the woman's edition of *Der Standard* –, the well-known feminist Birgit Sauer, professor of political theory at the University of Vienna, disclosed:

There are two levels in feminist science: feminist and gender research in the various disciplines and Gender Studies as an own discipline. In this regard a lot happened from 1970 to 1990. A Gender research unit was established at Vienna University, and also different [feminist] chairs were created ... in philosophy, in history, and political science... But with the wave of retirements in the recent years, it came to a struggle for these professorships. Unfortunately, Feminist Studies at the Vienna University lost it often... In philosophy the chair [of Herta Nagl] was not filled by a feminist professor and the reappointment of the chair of Eva Kreisky, the pioneer of feminist political science, is uncertain. The University set a half-hearted signal even about the Gender Studies chair that was discontinued last week. Now we have a Master's Degree of Gender Studies which stands now without a professorship - that's a joke! At the University of Vienna, there are more fights in this field than at other universities, because of the precarious financial situation. (Sauer 2015b)

Furthermore, Sauer deplors the fact that there is no long-term strategy for the establishment of Gender Studies as academic discipline. Thus, not only is the institutionalization precarious, but also the gender thematic is in many disciplines marginal, especially in Austria. "The German Research Foundation, DFG, has since five years a gender program, so that a reflection on this theme must be present in all research proposals. At the Austrian Science Fund there is nothing like that, and no one is committed to the issue," she says.

In another recent study, Sauer gives a long analysis on the struggle for the institutionalization of Feminist Theory and Gender Studies in the German-speaking countries and comes to

the conclusion that "On the one hand, the institutionalization of Women's and Gender Studies in the Political Sciences was relatively successful, but on the other hand, it would be justifiably to assert that it successfully failed." (Sauer 2015a, 127)

In their article "Feminist science is coming into trouble," published in the same edition of *Die Standard*, the authors – Sarah Yolanda Koss and David Tiefenthaler, freelance journalists and students at Vienna University – are deploring the same fact, namely that, at Vienna University, feminist critique is becoming unwanted, and thus many feminist fields tend to disappear:

With Herta Nagl-Docekal in philosophy, Edith Saurer in history and Eva Kreisky in political science a critical-feminist focus were created at the University of Vienna in the last decades which enjoyed international recognition. But currently the feminist researches have a strong counteraction – inside as well as outside of the university. With Kreisky's retirement in 2012, the chair of political theory was released. To date, it is open and the continuation of the feminist political studies introduced by her is unclear. In any case, in the chair tender of 2013, this [feminist] focus was not mentioned. (Koss/ Tiefenthaler 2015)

In other words, the call for tenders of Kreisky's chair was for "Political Theory," without any further specification. Moreover, the rector rejected the nomination of the jury, which proposed two women and a man, saying that the women were "unqualified," and their professional specialization is "too narrow." Consequently, a new sequence of the nominations was done so that the man moved from third place to first. This procedure was contested as a violation of the principles of equal treatment, and sent to the Arbitration Commission of the University. On the initiative of the students, an international petition was started which was signed by renowned professors, including Judith Butler. In conclusion, the authors of the article invited the readers to sign the petition. But as we actually know, the 1000 professors' signatures could not help, and the case is still unclear.

The Sauer interview and the article by Koss and Tiefenthaler provoked strong reactions from some university scholars.

In his article "Vienna University: No gender leasehold properties," published in *Der Standard* (the men's edition of *Standard*), Stefan Brocza, lecturer in the same Faculty of Political Sciences, reminds that Kreisky was an internationally recognized representative of the critical feminist tradition, but her chair and the call for tenders were not about feminism:

It's not about the reappointment of a relevant gender professorship or a theory with gender focal point. The tender stated simply 'political theory' without any addition. The successor should represent the entire field in its full breadth and depth. She or he should have 'outstanding achieve-

ments in research, international reputation, and excellent publication activities and integration into the international scientific community.' (Brocza 2015)

Depicting the academic struggle, he criticizes the way that Kreisky got the chair, and then the actual nominations, and concludes that none of the struggling parties will receive glory; neither the Institute, because, in fact, it did not support a feminist focal point of research, nor the rector, because he did not take a firm position by assuming the consequences and appointing the best candidate (probably the male professor).

Another impassionate reaction, which is of special interest here, is the article by Elisabeth Nemeth, professor at the Department of Philosophy and Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Education at the University of Vienna, "Fog over the Gender Studies?" (Nemeth 2015) It is striking that her text was printed in *Der Standard* and not in *Die Standard*, even though it was a direct response to the interview of Birgit Sauer and the article by Sarah Yolanda Koss and David Tiefenthaler.

Nemeth begins with a firm statement, that "in the debates about an alleged feminist claim to professorships at Vienna University, it came to cheap misstatements" and that "it is time to let populism aside in order to comply with already achieved standards of argumentation." (Ibid.) She recalls that the conditions for women's careers and gender research at the University of Vienna have recently been critically discussed often, which is a good thing, however incorrect points were publicly claimed: "It is wrong to claim that in the past a chair of Feminist philosophy was created, which had not been filled," referring to the chair of Herta Nagl. This professorship did not contain any sub-specification of philosophy. "Herta Nagl's research and teaching were about philosophy in all its breadth," and she dealt with feminism and gender intensively. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Institute of Philosophy created an environment that promoted feminist concerns. Nemeth also emphasizes that the University's policy at that time included three points: First, the viewpoint that a clear distinction must be made between the promotion of academic careers of women, and the promotion of feminist research; women should not feel forced, directly or indirectly, to pursue more feminist theory as other scientific interests. Second, it was clear that moving away from the term "women's studies" to "gender studies" contributed in a theoretical and political way. Thus, the criticism of the essentialist dualism "man/woman" made feminism politically questionable, as women could no more claim the sole representation in terms of gender. Third, there was the viewpoint that chairs of feminism or gender studies are not the wisdom's last word. That is why neither philosophy nor feminist gender theory should be established as a closed area in itself for filling a niche. Even when few women could anchor at the University in this way, gender issues should not be isolated to research and teaching. Regarding these questions, outlines Nemeth, feminists never

absolutely agreed and such an agreement is not desirable. Yet, what is desirable is to keep the academic reputation which Herta Nagl gave to feminist philosophy. Her work in feminist theory responded to the same systematic standards as demanded in other areas of philosophy, and this was of the highest value for feminist philosophy. A gender specialization of her chair would not be of help to feminism in philosophy. Given the thematic breadth of Herta Nagl's internationally recognized and highly respected research, after her retirement in 2009, the tender of the chair was called "Political Philosophy and Social Philosophy," i.e. with a range in which gender issues could be, but must not be, integrated. The jury nominated an internationally highly respected philosopher for first place, a man without specialization in feminist research, which was a legitimate option for the Institute. Hence, the cheap misrepresentation of the dedication of the chair as a feminist one, and the critique that it was given to a non-feminist, is highly inappropriate. In conclusion, Nemeth states:

Historical reminiscences cannot answer the questions we ask ourselves today: What are the institutional and structural causes of the "glass ceiling"? How will gender research be further developed in philosophy? The debates will - as usual - have to be based on international research and quality standards. (Ibid.)

Let us take a closer look at the presented positions and debates. Stefan Brocza is absolutely right – and this is, of course, the main problem – that the call for tenders of the Kreisky chair was for Political Theory at large, without any mention of a feminist focal point. If the call were with a specification, then the rector could not so easily say the first two nominated women are not qualified for the professorship. The proof is that the second one nominated, Nikita Dhawan, got a professorship in late 2014 at the University of Innsbruck for "Political Science, Political theory with a thematic emphasis in the field of Women's and Gender Studies."¹ So much for her qualifications.

As for Herta Nagl's chair, Elisabeth Nemeth insists that the call for tenders was "Political Philosophy and Social Philosophy" without any sub-specification. But in the online comments, a person under the pseudonym of "dobiezki," obviously an ex-member of the Institute of Philosophy, accuses Nemeth of giving incorrect information and being perfidious:

The chair of Nagl was called as follows: 'Political Philosophy and Social Philosophy with implication of Philosophy of Law and Philosophical Gender Studies.' The current chair-holder is not competent in the field of Gender Studies; so when Nemeth was asked about, she replied that the Institute took decision against the Gender Studies. There is falsity and falseness. Years ago, the same Institute for Philosophy at Vienna University took a similar decision: as the Peers in the

¹ See the chair at: http://www.zefg.fu-berlin.de/Datenbanken/Professuren-mit-Teil-oder-Voll-Denomination-fuer-Frauen--und-eschlechterforschung/datensaetze_oesterreich_schweiz/oesterreich/dhawan_nikita_nachfolge_werlhof_innsbruck.html.

course of an evaluation of the Institute appraised the Working Group of Feminist Philosophy as outstanding and recommended to expand it, it happen exactly the same, namely nothing. (Dobieszki 2015)

As I'm neither a member of the Institute, nor do I work at Vienna University, I cannot say anything about the exact formulation of the call for tender. But years ago, when I was a guest researcher there, I was an associated member of the aforementioned Working Group, and I remember the evaluation quite well. So, this last part of the above comment is correct. For the rest, no matter how the call was formulated, it is clear that the Institute of Philosophy at Vienna University, similar to the Institute of Political Sciences, which did not support a feminist focal point of research, decided against the fields of Feminist Philosophy and the Philosophical Gender Studies. I suppose that the whole procedure is done in a legal way so that no one can complain or rebut it. But does this mean that there is only "populism," "cheap misstatements," and "fog over the Gender Studies" in the testimonials of Sauer, Koss, and Tiefenthaler, as Nemeth suggests? What all three authors deplore is the fact that, after the retirement of such personalities like Eva Kreisky and Herta Nagl, feminist research in Political Sciences and in Philosophy risks being lost in the case that there is no more recruitment of professors working in these fields. Sure, there are "no gender leasehold properties" on professorships which are on "Political Theory" at large or on "Political Philosophy and Social Philosophy" at large, but there is something very curious in the arguments against the "narrowness" of Feminist Political Theory and the Philosophical Gender Studies used against some candidates, labeling their professional field of specialization as "too narrow." When Brocza underlines that, according the call for tenders, Eva Kreisky's successor "should represent the entire field in its full breadth and depth" than it follows, no more no less, that he/she should also be a specialist on Feminist Political Theory as a part of Political Theory. The position of Elisabeth Nemeth is more multisided, playing with open debates and concepts, but even she insists on "argumentative quality standards," her own argumentation is not exempt from inconsistencies.

Nemeth knows, that someone could object that Herta Nagl's successor is not competent in Philosophical Gender Studies. Therefore she underlines at the very beginning: "It is wrong to claim that in the past a chair of Feminist philosophy was created, which had not been filled," and explains later that since there was no sub-specification of the call for tender "gender issues could be, but must not be integrated." She is perfectly aware that it would be not plausible to directly argue the uselessness of feminist and gender issues, which had a great impact in the past and contributed to the Institute's international reputation. So, between her initial statement and the conclusion about the unrequired feminist chair in philosophy, she gives an extensive tutorial about high quality standards and policies of career advancement. In brief,

she seems to advocate the promotion of women (as she herself is a woman who arrived, fortunately, to break the "glass ceiling," becoming a professor, then director of the Philosophy Institute, and finally dean of the whole Philosophy faculty), but she does not insist on the promotion of Feminist Studies which is, she says, "something different," emphasizing that feminist chairs are not "wisdom's last word." In particular, Feminist Philosophy seems not to be needed. Evoking the move from Women's Studies to Gender Studies as a broader area, Nemeth *indirectly* suggests a move from Feminist Philosophy to the philosophical Gender Studies. I say "indirectly," because, in fact, she blends both terms at many points in her text. Yet Feminist Philosophy² and philosophical Gender Studies are not the same pair of shoes; the one cannot replace or sublate the other. In the interview that I conducted with Herta Nagl in 1998, she explains why "Gender Studies in the area of Philosophy" is a term that cannot replace "Feminist Philosophy," and she underlines that there is not just a difference of terminology, but of thematics. Thus, both concepts have their legitimacy, according to her, but we should be aware that the broad notion of Gender Studies bears the danger of losing the critical emancipatory impact inherent to the Feminist Studies. (Nagl-Docekal/Raynova 2010, 182) Moreover, as I already mentioned, the professorship of Nikita Dhawan at the University of Innsbruck has a "thematic emphasis in the field of Women's and Gender Studies," which shows that both fields are still needed, something on what Herta Nagl also insists (Nagl-Docekal, 1994, 181) Nemeth, on the contrary, aims to prove that both fields are not needed, either in Philosophy (as fields of Feminist Philosophy or philosophical Gender Studies), or as their own areas of research which should be institutionalized as chairs.

For the devaluation of Feminist Philosophy – one of Herta Nagl's main fields of contribution – and hence of a chair of philosophical Gender Studies, Nemeth uses her most sophisticated argument about the international academic reputation of Herta Nagl:

Herta Nagl gave feminist philosophy an academic prestige that it never enjoyed before. Her work is the proof that she used in Feminist Theory the same systematic standards as demanded in other areas of Philosophy. This was for Feminist Philosophy of highest value. A gender-specialization of her professorship would not have helped Feminist Philosophy to arrive to such reputation. Given the thematic breadth of Herta Nagl's internationally highly respected research, after her retirement in 2009, the call for tender of her chair was for "Political Philosophy and Social Philosophy" – that is, with a range in which gender issues can be, but must not be integrated. (Nemeth 2015)

² She defines Feminist Philosophy as "philosophizing guided by the interest of woman's liberation," (see Nagl-Docekal, 1994, 13).

But what does this statement really mean?

Firstly, Nemeth insinuates that Feminist Philosophy is something less than all "other areas of Philosophy," which, as everybody knows, were created by men and are still dominated by men who define its standards of excellence. Second, this permits her to claim that "a *gender-specialization of her professorship* would not have helped Feminist Philosophy to arrive to such reputation" (sic!), i.e. that if the denomination of the chair was on feminist or gender issues in Philosophy, and if Herta Nagl had worked only on Feminist Philosophy, no matter how excellent her work may be, she would never have earned the same recognition, nor arrived to give prestige to the field. (This is also the logic of the rector – Feminist Studies are too narrow.) Besides the fact that you cannot be good in Feminist Philosophy without being a good philosopher, i.e. without competences in "other areas of Philosophy," here we must deal with similar prejudices as in the time of Marie de Gournay and Poullain de la Barre. The difference is that actually it is not (just) about the intellectual capacities of women, but about the area of their research and methodology. Sure, Feminist Philosophy does not have the same "prestige" as, for example, Analytic Philosophy, because it is not a dominant discourse, and never will be. Moreover, as a critical methodology, it is quite inconvenient – it calls into question the "order of discourse," power relations in society and philosophy, "grand narratives," ways of speech, and argumentation which produce oppression and exclusion. Therefore, it is very convenient to say that Feminist Philosophy became prestigious only because of Herta Nagl (a nice way to flatter her), and thus to suggest that this prestige is passé with her retirement, i.e. that Feminist Philosophy has no own "scientific" value or theoretical impact. Third, all this permits Nemeth to propose that a special chair in Feminist Philosophy/philosophical Gender Studies is not needed.

Without a doubt, Nemeth's arguments go hand in hand with the decision of the Institute against Gender Studies and Feminist Philosophy. The future will show if this was an academic gain, advancing Philosophy to the highest international standards praised by her, or a loss that will maybe never be recouped. In any case, there is an obvious inconsistency in her argumentation and evaluation standards. On the one hand, if the Institute really wanted to keep the academic reputation and topical breadth that Herta Nagl gave to the chair, as Nemeth pretends, then the call for tenders should be *uncut*, i.e. it should be "Political Philosophy and Social Philosophy with implication of Philosophy of Law and Philosophical Gender Studies" in order to make sure that these fields will be covered. On the other hand, the areas of "Political and Social Philosophy" are so broad, when unspecified, that it would be hard to find a scholar who is competent in their whole. Today, almost every scholar specializes in some topic, thus everyone who applies for such a position could be rejected with the argument that he/she lacks of "thematic breadth." On the contrary, if there were specifications or sub-

specifications of the academic field, the argument of "narrowness" could not be used as easily. So, there are (good) standards and (bad) standards, and it is not just about argumentation, but about the hidden interests behind it, i.e. about power relations and legal ways of marginalization and obliteration of inconvenient fields of education and research. If there is a "fog over the Gender Studies," as Nemeth claims, then there is no less "fog over call for tenders" based on shady arguments about "thematic breadth" and "narrowness."

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