

Conference Report 'The Geopolitics of Gender Studies'

Julia Gruhlich¹

The 2nd annual meeting and conference of the International Research Association of Institutions of Advanced Gender Studies (RINGS) titled 'The Geopolitics of Gender Studies' took place in Cape Town, South Africa, from 16 to 18 November 2016.

RINGS was inaugurated at Örebro University, Sweden, in October 2014. In November 2015, the national assembly meeting and a conference focusing on gender studies in the neoliberal university was held in Prague, Czech Republic. (This special issue of *Gender and Research* is one of the results of the conference). One purpose of RINGS is to promote advanced, critical, transformative, self-reflexive gender and feminist research. In order to enhance transnational and cross-functional cooperation of critical gender scholars the first two RINGS conferences mainly served as a meeting place for the representatives of the various member organisations and as a possibility to get to know each other. For this reason, the call for papers for both conferences, in Prague as well as in Cape Town, was open only to member institutions of the RINGS-network.

The goals of the conference in 2016 were to: discuss topics that currently dominate gender research, contemplate the geopolitical shape of feminist scholarship, exchange experience with pedagogical practices, and expand possible scholarly collaborations across/between/transnational contexts.

The conference programme covered a broad range of themes, all of which were concerned with different aspects of gender, racism, and post-colonial power inequalities. To offer a broad thematic focus on issues questioning the geopolitics of gender, seven consecutive panels with 29 oral presentations were organised: (1) 'The Geopolitics of Gender Studies: Continuities and Change', (2) 'Queer Studies across the Global Contexts', (3) 'Diversity & Inclusion/Exclusion', (4) 'Gender Studies: Contemporary Contexts & Challenges', (5) 'Gender Equality: Geopolitical Perspectives', (6) 'Critical Posthumanism & Decoloniality', (7) 'Ethics of Care: Intimacy & Vulnerability'.²

In view of the topic of this special issue, I focus here on the presentations that referenced the processes of neoliberalisation. The keynote speaker, Josephine Ahikire from Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, brought attention to the situation of gender studies in Uganda. Since the 1990s, gender studies has increasingly gained

¹ Dr. Julia Gruhlich, Institute of Sociology, Georg-August-University Göttingen, Julia.gruhlich@uni-goettingen.de

² For the conference abstracts see: <http://ringsgender.org/aktuality/rings-conference-the-geopolitics-of-gender-studies#.WJmhnHqvXVU>.

acceptance as a result of governmental support. The Ugandan government largely depends on international donors of development aid. One difficulty with this is that politicians only support a specific kind of knowledge that is directly applicable (e.g., consulting, evaluation of gender mainstreaming processes, etc.), at the expense of theoretical basic research. After this inaugural talk, Amanda Gouws from the University of Stellenbosch in Cape Town, South Africa, had a talk that answered to and commented on the keynote lecture. She stated that donor funding was reduced at the same time as gender studies got institutionalised and diversified (including studies on masculinity and sexuality). She concluded that putting new issues on the agenda might harm gender studies' legitimacy. According to her, the diversification of gender knowledge and the professionalisation of gender consultancy could increase gender studies' independence from political pressures. For the future, she pins hopes on the new generation of gender scholars, who may be able to address issues that are politically taboo and marginalised, such as LGBTQ and land rights.

Many of the problems raised in the keynote speech were similar to those described by European researchers that were confronted with the neoliberal university. This includes the dependence on external funding, precarious jobs, and the assessment of individual success according to allegedly universal norms as well as indirect and hidden forms of discrimination. The process of neoliberalisation is one of the major developments at European universities. All talks in panel four ('Contemporary Challenges') were devoted to the effects of the neoliberal university on gender studies.

Eliza Steinbock from Leiden University challenged the alleged multiculturalism heralded by European universities. Although universities present themselves as open to cultural diversity, they do not really fight implicit forms of racism and do not openly discuss the fact that most of the employees at universities are male, white, and heterosexual.

Kadri Aavik from Tallinn University talked about the situation in Estonia where gender studies are not institutionalised and remain largely invisible. Scientists have precarious jobs and are highly dependent on external funding. Scientists and especially those interested in research on gender have to struggle for their existence and only receive recognition and promotion from funding organisations if they produce applicable results. As a matter of consequence, there is a lack of theoretical basic and critical research, especially regarding social issues. The need for political acceptance and financial support of gender studies thus also contradicts the scientific criterion of excellence that is set in the international scientific community. Meeting these criteria mostly involves publishing in English in peer-reviewed international journals and this in turn means having a low impact on Estonian debates.

In harsh contrast to the Estonian case, gender studies in Sweden is a highly institutionalised discipline and an integral part of science. Liisa Husu from Örebro

University recounts her experience with one of the by-products of the neoliberalisation of academics, the acceleration of the review and evaluation processes that create high visibility, which consequently builds the ground for further political and financial support. Based on the example of an evaluation that certified the Gender Centre and the gender study programme at Örebro University as insufficient, she critically asks who is empowered and entitled to make such powerful judgements. Especially in the case of gender studies, mostly comprising a small field of experts, the jury entails specialists in gender research on the one hand and on the other hand also scientists with a totally different scholarly background. Answering the unfair evaluation report, the Gender Centre employed collective counter-strategies such as letters of support from the scientific community and an extensive self-evaluation report.

Heike Kahlert from Ruhr-University Bochum, provided insights into the German state initiatives and debates on excellence in science in relation to gender. Here, one can see that gender was an integral part of the state funding system, review, and evaluations procedures and thus led to an increase in gender knowledge and gender equality initiatives. However, there is a considerable counter-reaction claiming that gender should not be an integral part of excellence. And even gender studies requires a change in the funding mechanism because it is mainly women studying STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) who benefit from the excellence funding, whereas the humanities and social sciences are disadvantaged.

At first glance, gender studies faces similar challenges worldwide. However, it became yet again obvious that feminist scholarship has never been a seamless unitary body of knowledge production: in regards to the neoliberal processes and practices, the conference brought attention to significant differences that mainly depend on national political, socio-economic, and material contexts in which the different centres of feminist scholarship are located.

A great merit of the conference is the international exchange of experiences of gender researchers. The conference enriched the field of gender studies by contributing international perspectives on the contemporary political situation of the discipline and gender research. The presence of representatives from across Europe, former Soviet countries and southern Africa in particular helped extend the debate to areas of research which remain on the periphery even within mainstream gender research.

However, despite the diverse size of the network, it was striking to see that Western and Northern European countries were over-represented at the conference and, thus, dominated the debates. Representatives of Australia and America were largely absent and it is unfortunate that other African and Arabic countries as well as other continents such as Latin America and Asia are not yet part of the network. RINGS was established

in Sweden, a country with a long tradition of gender studies. This regional advantage certainly worked in favour of the institutionalisation of a global network of gender studies, but also laid the foundation for the current national imbalance. It is good that RINGS wants to emancipate from global hierarchies and structural inequalities and seeks to enlarge and open up to more countries from different continents. By now RINGS includes 46 gender centres from 20 different countries in Africa, Australia, the Caribbean, Europe, and North and South America and continuously strives to enlarge the network. At the conference, member organisations were once more encouraged to invite others to become a new RINGS member with particular emphasis on an attempt to strengthen the participation of Global Southern countries outside Europe and the post-Soviet states in Central and Eastern Europe.

To become a member of the network, contact Jeff Hearn, Örebro University, Sweden: Jeff.Hearn@oru.se. For more information on RINGS, see <http://ringsgender.org/>.

Čtvrt století kritické teorie v Praze

Zuzana Uhde

V roce 1993 se v Praze konala první konference „Philosophy and Social Science“, která navazovala na dřívější vědecká setkávání mezi Východem a Západem na Korčule v 60. a 70. letech 20. století a od poloviny 70. let v Dubrovniku, kde na počátku stáli jako organizátoři Jürgen Habermas a Gajo Petrović. Zatímco dubrovnický seminář byl v roce 1991 ukončen válečným konfliktem v bývalé Jugoslávii, v Praze byla zahájena dnes již 25letá tradice mezinárodního setkávání a dialogu vědců a vědkyň inspirovaných tradicí kritické teorie, kterou v současnosti organizuje mezinárodní kolektiv konferenčních ředitelů: Alessandro Ferrara (Itálie), Marek Hrubec (ČR), María Pía Lara (Mexiko), William E. Scheuerman (USA), Maeve Cook (Irsko), Rainer Forst (Německo), Amy Allen (USA) a Hartmut Rosa (Německo). Letošního setkání v Praze v druhé půlce května se zúčastnila celá řada významných osobností a celkově více než 150 přednášejících ze zahraničí, konkrétně z Německa, Itálie, Velké Británie, Irska, Dánska, USA, Mexika, Brazílie, Jihoafrické republiky a řady dalších zemí. Setkání se neslo v duchu rekapitulace, ale i společenských a vědeckých vyhlídek do budoucna a reflexe role kritické teorie.

Letošnímu výročí bylo také věnováno speciální číslo časopisu *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (roč. 43, č. 3/2017) vydávaného v Bostonu, ve kterém současní i bývalí konferenční ředitelé a ředitelky i pravidelní účastníci a účastnice konference představují