Between Anti-Feminism and Ethnicized Sexism

Far-Right Gender Politics in Germany

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In March 2018, more than 4,000 right-wing protesters demonstrated in Kandel, a small town in Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany. Their motivation was the death of 15 year-old Mia, who had been killed in December 2017 by her ex-boyfriend Abdul in a drugstore in Kandel. Mobilized under the slogan 'Kandel is everywhere' (*Kandel ist überall*) via Facebook, Youtube and Twitter, the murder was made into a political symbol of the supposedly flawed migration and refugee policy of the German government, since the perpetrator had fled from Afghanistan to Germany. The call was answered by a broad spectrum of right-wing actors, including neo-Nazis, the Identitarian Movement, far-right extremist hooligans as well as members of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, making '*Kandel ist überall'* a symbol of far-right resistance. By referring to the violated safety of girls and women, and the lack of protection for these groups, hatred and exclusion against migrants and fugitives is rationalized: "We mothers did not have children to have them defiled and slaughtered by the Merkel guests", was shouted over loudspeakers at the demonstration. The initiative also continues to mobilize online by using sexualized violence against women to justify far-right positions. Under the title 'Merkel's stumbling stones' (*Merkels Stolpersteine*), a picture of brass plates with names of murdered girls (such as Mia's) appears on the many online platforms of the initiative. They look like the stumbling stones used to memorialize the victims of Nazi purges, thus symbolically equating the crimes.

The *Kandel Manifesto* resembles a classic catalogue of far-right demands: Border closure for all types of immigration to Germany, deporta-

tion of "illegal immigrants", assimilation and *jus sanguinis* (the principle of descent for the acquisition of German citizenship). In pink letters they demand "Germany first" and the abolition of mosques, a ban on the full veil, the reintroduction of compulsory military service and information on "insurmountable cultural differences" between Europeans and non-Western migrants[1].

Online banner by the initiative Kandel is everywhere writing "Merkel's stumbling stones".[2]

Murders, sexualized violence, feminicide, women's rights and equality are no longer issues here. It is not surprising that these topics have no place in far-right discourse, since they advocate anti-feminist politics and practices. It is not the first time that the racist narrative of the violent migrant man who attacks 'German girls' has proved to be an enormous motivator for mobilization. It also shows how gender issues are absolutely central for racist and authoritarian demands and right-wing mobilizations. The AfD is a key group here because it has been the strongest opposition in the Bundestag since 2017 and is represented in almost all state parliaments. As the parliamentary arm of a far-right culture war, it represents anti-feminist positions by, on the one hand, opposing equality policies, gender studies, feminists and same-sex marriage, and on the other hand, supporting normative 'traditional' gender roles and concepts of family. At the same time, it emphasizes, as it did at the demonstration in Kandel, the rights of women and minorities – gender equality as part of 'German val-

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1 | (Kandel ist Überall (2018): "Das Manifest von Kandel", (https://kandel-ist-ue berall.de/startseite/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ manifest-von-kandel.pdf).

2 | Source: https://kandel-ist-ueberall.de/startseite/wp-content/uploads/2018 /07/stolpersteine_titel_2.jpg.

ue culture' – and presents itself as protector of women against sexualized violence and for their sexual self-determination. It is thus representative of a new way of making politics with gender. The AfD will be used as an example in this chapter to show what far-right gender politics currently looks like and what functions it fulfils for them. In doing so I will ask: Which topics and terms are occupied and how? Which political strategies, rhetoric, linguistic images and narratives are used? How are anti-feminist positions combined with an emphasis on women's rights? What impact on public and political debate can be observed? What could gender-sensitive counter-strategies look like?

THREAT SCENARIO GENDER: REPRODUCTION, FAMILY AND FAR-RIGHT GENDER HIERARCHY

"Hungary wants to abolish gender studies! Let's do the same: Cut funding for unscientific branches of research!". "Welcome culture for newborns and unborn babies" was posted on Facebook on Christmas Eve. The AfD-Bavaria demanded on Twitter: "Bavaria gender-free! No to gender mainstreaming and early sexualixation". According to the AfD, the goal of gender education is "to systematically 'correct' the classical understanding of the roles of men and women through state-sponsored re-education programs in kindergartens and schools."[3] The chairman of the AfD-Thuringia, Björn Höcke demanded at a demonstration: "We must rediscover our masculinity. Because only if we rediscover our masculinity do we become manly. And only if we become manly do we become fortified, and we must become fortified, dear friends!" (Lehmann 2018). On the occasion of World Women's Day 2018, the structural disadvantage of women in society was compared in the Bundestag with a "yeti" that everyone was talking about but that nobody had ever seen.[4]

Online campaigns, political speeches, party and election programs intertwine here to express the same content in different ways. Jasmin Siri

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3 | AfD Basic Program from 2016, p. 55.

4 | Speech by AfD Member of Parliament Nicole Höchst on the occasion of World Women's Day 2018 in the Bundestag (https://www.bundestag.de/mediathek?videoid=7205644#url=L21lZGlhdGhla292ZXJsYXk/dmlkZW9pZD03MjA1NjQ0&mod=mediathek).

(2016) describes how AfD party and election programs are worded much more liberally than campaigns and speeches by its politicians. It becomes clear that the more directly the contents are addressed to the citizens, the clearer and more radically they are worded, as Höcke's speech illustrates. Through social media they can directly address their sympathizers and it allows them to position themselves as the voice of 'the people' in a staged proximity to 'their own people' and their concerns (Reisigl 2012: 154). Gender politics in the AfD consists largely of anti-gender politics, i.e. mainly politics that oppose emancipative contents, actions and institutions. These anti-gender politics are defined in opposition to an imagined gender ideology, the goal of this gender ideology is defined as:

"Gender ideology marginalizes natural differences between the sexes and questions gender identity. It wants to abolish the classical family as a life model and role model. Thus it is in clear contradiction to the Basic Law which protects (classically understood) marriage and family as a state-supporting institute, because only this can produce the people of the state as supporters of sovereignty. Gender ideology contradicts the scientific findings of biology and developmental psychology as well as the daily life experience of many generations."[5]

AfD thus constructs a specific threat scenario on multiple levels:

1. The 'traditional family', as a heterosexual marriage with children, is attacked and abolished by a gender ideology that is present in all areas of life (work, school, science).
2. Gender ideology contradicts people's perception of gender and sex and endangers the natural development of gender and sexuality in children.
3. The 'traditional family' ensures the continued existence of the 'pure people', which is precisely what is threatened by the existence of gender ideology.
4. The governing parties promote the instruments of gender ideology and thus the abolition of 'their own people'.

On the basis of this threat scenario, the AfD can do two things: On the one hand, justify its anti-politics; on the other hand, legitimize its own

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5 | AfD Basic Program from 2016, p. 40.

gender and family ideologies as national biopolitical policies, centred around the heterosexual family to save the 'pure people.' This 'rescue' involves an increase in the birth rate of the 'native population' and a new abortion register, legal changes to the abortion law and pregnancy-conflict counselling in the interest of 'life protection'. Strategically, key terms would become additionally 'protected': Just as *marriage* is granted exclusively to heterosexual couples, the term *family* is only accorded to those unions that follow the model of a heterosexual marriage with children.

Rhetorically, right-wing populist gender and family policies are described as protective (e.g. of the 'traditional family'), ending discrimination (e.g. of full-time mothers), supportive and facilitating (e.g. of women's freedom of choice for motherhood) (Siri 2016). Anti-gender-politics and the goals of oppressive gender ideology are also combined with an aggressive rhetoric of annihilation (Berg 2016). Strategically, a combination of defamation, emotionalization and annihilation goals are used to re-define terms and policies that relate to gender issues. At the same time, these re-definitions are contrasted with supposed common sense constructs – pseudo-general knowledge about heterosexual binaries being natural. All politics in support of gender equality appear, on these terms, as if imposed from above on people against their will, a far cry from their reality as a political instrument that is intended to protect people from various forms of discrimination. In the AfD's online campaigns a variety of staging strategies are also used to legitimize heteronormative ideas as natural. People from an educational elite, mostly men with professorships or doctoral degrees, act as educators, teaching concepts such as gender or gender mainstreaming (Berg 2016: 94). Another staging strategy is to have female party members appear as key witnesses. As a member of a discriminated group – as women, mothers or female politicians – they deny that there is discrimination and oppose countermeasures (ibid.: 95). In all of these ways and more, far-right gender and family politics focus strongly on the regulation of women and female bodies.

The AfD constructs a line of conflict between the 'pure people,' on the one hand, and gender ideology and the other parties, on the other. Ultimately, the AfD positions itself in this field of conflict on the side of the 'people', as a fighter for the survival of the German people and for their supposedly natural understanding of gender and sexuality, ideally represented by the normative family. This is where online media and speeches are particularly effective, as this narrative is especially suitable

for addressing sympathizers directly. The lost ideal of masculinity campaigned for by Björn Höcke can be positioned here, as can the idealization of the mother role of female party members and the sexist posters of younger AfD members. The family politics of the AfD ultimately has two functions: First, an ethnicist concept of 'the people' is conveyed through the family. Second, the family, consisting of mother, father and several children, is constructed as a leading figure in order to realize a naturally and hierarchically structured society (Bebnowski 2015: 7–8).

GENDER POLITICS IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION AND BELONGING

In recent years, far-right gender politics has increasingly shifted to a different thematic focus. Issues of gender and women's rights are linked to the topics of migration and Islam. Especially after the sexual assaults on New Year's Eve 2015/16 in Cologne, old right-wing narratives have been re-activated in order to position their own topics in the public debate. Various online media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube have been used to push these topics into the political and public discourses with two central narratives. In leading this push, the AfD has demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of how to combine online tools with its offline political practices in a way that is publicly effective.

The first narrative is practically omnipresent in contemporary European public discourse. The AfD and its members publish posters on Facebook at very short intervals with messages such as, "Brutal group rape: 8 migrants attack 13-year-old" and "Sexual offences on trains & at train stations 'Everyday life in Merkel-Germany': the proportion of non-German perpetrators rises to nearly 60%". These are illustrated with photos of victims of violence, or dark silhouettes with or without weapons, in public spaces. While the posters and contributions were formulated less directly in 2015 (Berg 2016), today no room for interpretation is left by either the language or images. Now a more direct scenario of violence and fear is named: people who are being labelled as migrant or non-German as perpetrators, and 'German' women as victims. The constant repetition of these old narratives on the AfD's social media channels is followed by interviews and talk show appearances by individual politicians supposedly legitimizing the scare claim.

One example of an effective combination of media campaigning and parliamentary political work is the AfD's representation of the case of the murdered and raped 14-year-old student Susanna from Mainz. The alleged perpetrator, Ali was described as a 21-year-old refugee who had fled from Iraq to Germany. Member of Parliament Thomas Seitz brought the case to the Bundestag. In a speech that was meant to be about debates on the Rules of Procedure in the house, he instead brought up the death of the schoolgirl and then remained demonstratively silent. The presiding vice president of the *Bundestag* Claudia Roth then asked him to speak to the debate, as otherwise she would expel him from the desk, which she did. A short time later there was a video on Twitter entitled "Minute of Silence for Susanna: Revealing Reaction of the Other Parties", which led the narrative for the broad media coverage that followed.

The narrative is always the same. The violent offender is marked as foreign, immigrant, misogynist and often Muslim, and as someone who has sexually abused and/or killed a girl or woman who is marked as 'German' or 'ours'. The other parties are positioned on the side of the perpetrators while the AfD presents itself like lawyers on behalf of the victims. The rhetorical strategy behind this is to establish the attributes Muslim, immigrant, misogynistic and violent as synonymous with one another. Furthermore, the acts of violence are presented as evidence to mark a general threat group, to homogenize it and to create a constant threat situation. Translated, it would mean that all migrant or migrant-labelled men are violent and hostile to women, and from them emanates a new permanent threat to 'our women' and 'our society'. They are thus marked as not belonging and alien to 'our society' and are made into the antagonistic evil 'other'.

The second narrative is directly connected to this and concerns women wearing headscarves, burka or niquab: "The equal rights of women and men guaranteed by the Basic Law as well as the free development of personality are contradicted by the headscarf as a religious-political sign of the subordination of Muslim women to men."[6] A full veil stands for conscious demarcation as well as for "a rejection of our enlightened-democratic values and our image of humankind."[7] AfD faction leader Alice

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6 | Ibid., p.40.

7 | AfD proposal in the Bundestag to ban full veiling in public spaces from February 21, 2018: (http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/008/1900829.pdf).

Weidel said in a speech in the Bundestag: "Burkas, girls in headscarves and financially supported knifemen and other good-for-nothings will not ensure our prosperity, economic growth and above all the welfare state."[8] On Facebook, the full veil is frequently used as a symbolic image as soon as the word 'Islamization' appears, for example in the headline "Covering Swimwear for Everyone! An Islamization is not happening?" First, a homogeneous group is constructed, which includes all women with headscarves, niquab or burka. They are labelled as oppressed, not integrated, a financial burden on society and symbolic of Islam, which has been marked as threatening. As such they stand for an antagonistic and incompatible culture and become symbolic of everything that a supposedly German society and culture is not: backward, violent, anti-women, discriminatory, Muslim. As Leila Hadj-Abdou has explained, this narrative portrays an inequality between the supposedly emancipated and free women of "one's own people" in contrast with oppressed Muslim women, a portrayal that serves to obscure the inequality between men and women within "one's own society" (2010: 118).

There are two gender-specific threat images that are intended to jointly create a threat scenario for the safety of 'our society' or 'our people', which simultaneously creates two opposing gendered groups. First, a misogynist, oppressive and violent group is labelled as Muslim and immigrant and is thus characterized as foreign, non-affiliated and threatening. They form the negative image for a supposedly free, gender-equal, emancipated, liberal, 'our German' society, and at the same time are presented as a threat to it. Birgit Sauer calls this "ethnomasochism", an idea of 'suffering' caused by the patriarchy of the 'others' (2017: 12). These narratives are both racist and sexist, since they divert sexism and sexualized violence into a cultural and personal problem of an othered group of men, while also using ascription and homogenization to characterize this group as inferior and dangerous based on a constructed culture of values. Ruth Wodak calls this combination of homogenization, dichotomous confrontation and characteristic ascription "neo-colonial sexism" (2015: 160). Second, yet simultaneously, the externalization of misogyny, sexual violence and discrimination against "the others" allows the self-declared natives to

legitimize the complete exclusion of this foreign group. Demands for national exclusion and the deportation of a group that is under general suspicion can thus be rallied behind an alleged need to protect 'our women' and their rights to freedom, 'our values' and 'our culture,' along with the promise of restoring a peaceful society. Koray Yilmaz-Günay has shown how such strategies of argument are arranged around claims about civil rights and liberties: "The reference to the freedom of individual women (and today also: homosexuals) robs a patriarchal analysis of its contexts [...] in order to conceal systematic inequality and to bring disadvantaged groups into opposition to one another" (2013: 118).

THE FAR-RIGHT CLAIM TO HEGEMONY IN GENDER POLITICS

Far-right gender politics make it possible to establish a social structure of inequality and standardization. Not only are exclusion and belonging established through a misconstrual of gender, but these divisions also create a privileging and hierarchization within 'the people'. Birgit Sauer points out that the far-right notion of natural gender inequality generates a general idea of inequality within a people, which subsequently legitimizes a social subordination and superiority of some over the rest (2017: 13). By excluding gender inequality, attributing it to a group of 'others' on the one hand and constructing gender politics as a misguided and threatening gender ideology on the other, the AfD can convey its idea of gender or gender justice as the only right one for the people and as coming from the people.

Behind this the AfD conceals its own concepts of inequality standardization and privileging. They claim sovereignty over the interpretation of what the right idea of gender and gender justice should be. They try to control the definitions of gender, family, marriage and sexuality, as well as the family and gender politics that are subsequently constructed. It is a balancing act between a pseudo-emancipatory coating that appears to protect women's rights or puts female MPs at the forefront of gender issues, and anti-feminist positions that make women the object of national population politics. However, this balancing act allows space for the ambiguities and contents of a broad right-wing spectrum and at the same time enables the AfD to connect to the center of society.

This anti-feminist position in combination with ethnicized sexism is shared in Europe and North America by many far right actors. The increased appearance of women as allies in the far right seems initially a welcome development, since they give movements and parties a 'softer' image, are considered less dangerous in mainstream discourse and thus cushion right-wing extremist content (Armstrong 2018). At the same time, they conflict with the notions of male supremacy within these groups, and are therefore only accepted if they advocate far-right content and do not develop emancipatory demands within the groups or publicly speak out against their assigned roles. The Anti-Defamation League (2018) published an analysis of the link between misogyny and white supremacy, showing how the other side of gender politics makes a special alliance possible. Male supremacy is, in this case, closely linked to the fear of white men losing their privileges. The fear of this loss unites classic far-right groups with women-hating men's rights groups in opposition to feminism and emancipatory gender roles. Similar to Sauer's argument, the notion of natural gender inequality and the inferiority of women is a gateway to an ideological notion of the natural inequality among people, who white men are supposed to lead. Politics with gender works in many ways and on different levels; it is not a German phenomenon but one that is represented internationally.

Conclusion

The AfD is only one of many anti-feminist actors in both Germany and Europe. Within Germany, the AfD can provide parliamentary backing for right-wing radical protest campaigns like *Kandel ist überall* where a wide range of far-right activists come together. They follow precisely the racist narratives about women's rights, sexualized violence and migration that have been described above, and combine online campaigns with street protests and public events as part of an online and offline strategy. In addition to women's rights and gender justice, the concept of feminism is here also reinterpreted in a racist and culturalizing way. Nevertheless, the terms, interpretations, narratives, language and images used are also reproduced in mainstream media and debates, and become represented and shared by actors in non-right contexts. The public debate about New Year's Eve 2015/2016 in Cologne is exemplary of this broad-spectrum alignment.

The increasing ethnicization of sexism we are witnessing now was also observed in earlier times (Jäger 2000). All of which shows that far-right politics offers a connecting space for these agendas, both in terms of its anti-feminism and familialism and in terms of the entanglement of sexism and racism, in particular anti-Muslim racism.

The aggressively conducted far-right culture war, with its new and old strategies and networks, presents democratic societies with a range of challenges. We must confront it online and offline and effectively counter the increasing normalization of far-right terms in and for public debates. Devaluation, discrimination, homogenization and hatred cannot be an 'opinion' in a democratic debate. It is necessary to disagree as an individual, group, organization or association with these terms for debate, and to debate their naturalization of misleading definitions of key terms. But first, we need to develop and share a common knowledge of far-right narratives and methods. Gender politics must become a more visible and significant aspect of our political battles. The acculturation of racist images linked to gender must be deconstructed, dismantling both the image of the 'oppressed woman wearing headscarves' as well as the 'migrant perpetrator of violence.' Narratives must be dealt with analytically. Ascription, homogenization and generalization must be identified and challenged. There needs to be a broad social debate about language and power. The aim may be to linguistically uncover far-right self-descriptions and terms, and to identify them for what they really are. The demand to construct appropriate meanings for key terms such as 'women's rights' and 'feminism' should not be handed over to the far right and their interpretations. Instead, we still need intersectional perspectives that can enable us to conceptualize the links between racial and gender inequality as well as the racist appropriation of both. This means, for example, that sexualized violence cannot be addressed and politicized only if the perpetrators can be othered. Sexism must continue to be identified as a structural problem and not a personal and cultural problem of a particular group of men. Resistance requires alliances, exchange and solidarity. Anti-racist positions and initiatives should not be positioned against feminist or queer content and groups. Both are affected by right-wing devaluations and attacks and can strengthen rather than divide each other. It is precisely in this way that effective and positive images of open, democratic coexistence within society can be created.

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