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Telling Feminist Stories in an Affective Atmosphere of Anti-Genderism: Swedish Gender Scholars Reflect Upon Their Position

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ABSTRACT

The last decades have witnessed a widespread rise in populist, right-wing, anti-gender movements targeting gender-equality politics and gender studies throughout Europe. While the situation for Swedish gender studies remains relatively stable, with institutionalized gender departments, this paper focuses on how Swedish gender studies scholars conceive of their situation and the status of gender studies in the current era. Through an interview study drawing on the concept of “affective atmosphere”, the article explores how the anti-gender discourse induces a precarious situation that produces a sense of apocalypse and a crisis of hope for gender studies. As such, the anti-gender discourse calls upon scholars to react and engage. In the interviews, the future of gender studies was discussed as being at risk, while at the same time the interviewees described gender studies as an academic success story. However, to avoid falling into the trap of being either too optimistic or too pessimistic about the current state of the art, the authors argue that the knowledge production of *gender studies as such* can be reconfigured as a site for resistance, for detecting openings and creating possible pathways into the future that extend beyond the hegemonic neoliberal, authoritarian one.

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Introduction

The focal point of this article is how Swedish gender scholars reflect upon the status and situation of gender studies in the current era of right-wing populism and anti-gender sentiment. Recently, the global spread of right-wing extremism and populism has caused an anti-elitist backlash against gender-equality politics in general and gender studies in particular throughout Europe. A growing anti-feminist mobilization has targeted gender studies, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. One example is the right-wing nationalist Hungarian government’s decision to reduce the independence of academia in allocating research funding, and to shut down gender studies departments. As a result, in 2018, the Central European University was relocated to Vienna and is now the first European university in exile (The Guardian, 2018). These events have led many scholars to conclude that “the feminist project” is under threat (Korolczuk, 2020; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018).

Similar anti-gender tendencies can be observed in Sweden. Feminism and gender equality have been regarded for decades as desirable in political rhetoric in Sweden—almost all

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political parties have proclaimed gender equality as a political goal, and the Social Democrat-led governments (from 2014 to 2022) called themselves feminist. The term “hegemonic feminism” has been used to describe how the relationship between feminism and official gender-equality politics has developed, leading to a feminism that is more closely tied to liberalism (De Los Reyes & Mulinari, 2020). While Sweden has had a reputation for being exceptional, even as “morally superior” and standing out by being essentially non-racist (Habel, 2012; Hübinette & Lundström, 2014) and more gender equal than other countries (De Los Reyes & Mulinari, 2020), this image has arguably become increasingly tarnished. Today, approximately half of the ministers in the liberal/conservative government still label themselves feminist,¹ even though the government as such has worked to abolish legislation such as the “feminist foreign policy” introduced by the Social Democrats in 2014 (Regeringskansliet, 2014).

Furthermore, explicit anti-gender movements are mobilizing against gender-equality policies and gender mainstreaming, portraying such policies as a conspiracy infiltrating the Swedish state and its citizens, and articulating gender equality as a fundamentalist religion (Martinsson, 2020). Hence, anti-gender sentiments can be found in Sweden, where conservative journalists have described gender studies as a threat to academic freedom (Lilja & Johansson, 2018; Martinsson, 2020) and gender scholars are being silenced to an increasing extent due to hatred and threats on social media (De Los Reyes et al., 2017). In the autumn of 2023, right-wing nationalist activists targeted Swedish universities with the purpose of sabotage, and of harassing fellow students and teachers in critical whiteness studies (Dagens Nyheter, 2023). Thus, academic institutions and the production of knowledge have become one of the main battlegrounds for anti-gender movements (Mulinari & Martinsson, 2023). Added to this, critical research fields in general have been increasingly targeted for being “too political” or not living up to standards of scientific knowledge production (Carlsson et al., 2023; Hämäläinen, 2019).

This paper engages with how gender studies as an academic discipline is understood by gender scholars in Sweden, with a focus on the stories that feminists tell in relation to the current historical and contextual setting. How feminists tell stories about the development of the field of gender studies, their/our own recent past, and “the times we’re in”, have been highlighted and problematized by gender scholars during the last few decades. Clare Hemmings (2005, 2011) has insisted on the need to pay attention to how (Western) feminists tell stories about the past, and has shown how these stories are framed around a startlingly singular narrative of progress, loss, and return. Robyn Wiegman (2014) has pointed out that feminist scholars were invested in a narrative about the apocalyptic future of feminism as well as how stories about “the times we’re in” are entangled with affect. Likewise, Lauren Berlant’s (2011) analysis points out that the present is understood primarily in affective terms.

Through interviews with gender scholars working in gender departments at Swedish universities, we analyse the stories about gender studies and how gender scholars are trying to re-establish professional legitimacy in relation to what can be described as anti-gender sentiments. The aim is to examine how a discourse of anti-genderism is constructed and experienced by Swedish gender scholars. We ask: how do gender scholars engage with the public anti-gender discourse? How do they (or we) make claims about the political landscape of the present to argue for their (our) standpoints? In line with Wiegman (2014), we thus seek to analyse what collective affect the narrative of “the times we’re in” brings to life. Added to this, we discuss how it is possible for gender scholars to engage with such an anti-gender affective atmosphere, and highlight the need to critically engage with the stories that they/we tell about Swedish gender studies. The first author speaks from a position as a feminist scholar at a Swedish gender studies department and has herself felt the fears that the anti-gender spreads and been involved in discussions on how to handle students with anti-gender agendas, amongst others. This position has required recurrent reflexive considerations to avoid tendentious reasoning and conclusions.

Context: Anti-Gender Movements and Gender Studies

There is a growing research field studying right-wing movements and their mobilization against gender-equality politics, especially from a European perspective (Gunnarsson Payne, 2019; Korolczuk, 2020; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Verloo, 2018). This research has shown that gender-equality politics is increasingly being targeted by growing populist, anti-feminist mobilization throughout Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). Populist transnational movements formulate politics that argue for “the people” against an elite, and the threat of a “gender ideology” is one central aspect that brings these groups together (Gunnarsson Payne, 2019). Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (2017) have used the term “anti-gender movement” to describe mobilizations and campaigns that target gender and sexual equality (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Especially within fragile democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, anti-gender movements are on the rise and gender-equality policy is retreating (Edenborg, 2021; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018).

In Sweden, anti-gender mobilizations have not been as successful as those in Central and Eastern Europe, if one judges by their impact on formal gender-equality politics. Nevertheless, in the Swedish Parliament, the Sweden Democrats have argued that the state should “stop financing gender theory in higher education” (Motion 2019/2020: 813). According to them, gender studies is “indoctrination built on politically false grounds”, and they argue that higher education should be freed from agenda-setting ideologies. Arguments against gender studies in academia are made in the name of freedom of academia, and one could thus claim that the Sweden Democrats have appropriated the language of academic freedom.

The anti-gender rhetoric of the Sweden Democrats in parliament has been met with counter arguments from, amongst others, the Environmental Party (Berglund, 2021), which arranged a seminar in parliament on the topic of academic freedom in 2021. Yet, in the 2022 election, the Sweden Democrats received more than a fifth of the votes, and the conservative right-wing government is supported by them. In 2022, the government launched an investigation into the alleged “cancel culture” in Swedish universities (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2023). The Minister of Higher Education described the problem as a matter of researchers being hindered in their research if they use “the wrong words” (due to woke culture), and that the government wants to ensure the freedom of researchers to present controversial results (SVT Nyheter, 2022). In a similar vein, the Danish Parliament made a statement in 2021 “against exaggerated activism within research” directed at research focusing on gender, Islam, and/or migration (Universitetsläraren, 2021). While this parliamentary statement urged the leadership of universities to keep an eye on the alleged problem of activism, no concrete decision was taken. However, the statement could be seen as a warning against critical research in general, and as such it poses a threat to academic freedom (Universitetsläraren, 2021). In the long run, it is a warning that all research that is not in line with governmental interests could be deemed activist, and not scientific.

Previous research shows how anti-gender movements affect academia and gender scholars in various ways internationally. Barbara Read (2018) has analysed the language of an anti-intellectual backlash in the USA against an imagined academic elite, and this elite is often attributed explicitly feminized characteristics. Andrea Petö discusses how anti-gender movements in Central and Eastern Europe are contributing to a process of altering the profession of gender scholars, positioning gender studies as “political” and making it less possible to remain within the “ivory tower of academia” (Petö, 2017, p. 297). Furthermore, as Kuhar demonstrates, the anti-gender movement’s use of “scientific evidence” against “gender ideology” means that any scientific or academic data can potentially become contested based on normative moral positions (Kuhar, 2015). As of today, there are no studies on how Nordic gender scholars relate to or experience this particular situation. Hence, the present article seeks to contribute to this research field.

Theorising Anti-Gender Sentiments as an Affective Atmosphere

In this article, we focus on the emotional aspects of how gender scholars engage with the anti-gender movement through the concept of the “affective atmosphere” (Anderson, 2009; Wiegman, 2014). This concept is helpful as an analytical tool because it captures the *sense* of “the times we’re in” and helps us to make the ambiguities of emotions visible by analysing both the presence and non-presence of threats and risks, as well as the materiality and non-materiality (sense) of the current situation in which gender scholars might find themselves. As Anderson claims: “As such, to attend to affective atmospheres is to learn to be affected by the ambiguities of affect/emotion, by that which is determinate and indeterminate, present and absent, singular and vague” (Anderson, 2009: abstract). Thus, an affective atmosphere is ambivalent in its form. As Anderson describes it: “On the one hand, atmospheres are real phenomena. They ‘envelop’ and thus press on a society ‘from all sides’ with a certain force. On the other hand, they are not necessarily sensible phenomena” (Anderson, 2009, p. 78), since they are mostly connected with emotion/affect.² While the collective atmosphere of “the times we’re in” can be understood as both non-material and material (in its effects), it is also ambivalent, and produces subjects, but it also calls upon those subjects to react to their situation. The materiality of the atmosphere emerges in the sense that it involves, for example, discussions and decisions about locking doors at gender departments, and hence influences the physical working place in its materiality. In this paper, we try to analyse how an affective atmosphere is evoked in temporal terms—thus defining both a present and a future at risk. As Lauren Berlant argues, the historical present is above all understood affectively (Berlant, 2011). An affective atmosphere is thus (amongst other ways) created through the stories that are told about the current situation (relating it to a perceived past and future).

Furthermore, inspired by Hemmings’ (Hemmings, 2005) research, we reflect upon what kinds of professional subjects gender scholars become when telling these stories about the anti-gender movement. That is, how are these subjects supposed to act and feel in relation to anti-genderism? Hemmings is critical of what could be labelled an insistent (Western) feminist narrative of “progress and loss” that oversimplifies a complex and more scattered picture of the development of feminist theories (Hemmings, 2005, p. 115). However, her point is not to make a corrective effort, and paint the “true” picture of the development of feminist theory, but rather to see these stories as narratives, which are sometimes incomplete and ambiguous. Similarly, we are not trying to capture the “correct” version of the situation of gender studies today, but to discuss how the anti-gender discourse articulated by gender scholars themselves is part of telling stories about the present and the past, as well as the future. Inspired by Hemmings, we ask: what discursive, emotional, and political work do these narratives constitute, and how do these stories form a particular feminist professional subject? By asking these questions, we are attempting to capture which parts of the affective atmosphere are so consistently reproduced that they are understood to “speak for themselves without further elaboration” (Hemmings, 2005, p. 117). Finally, at the end of the paper, we discuss how alternative feminist stories about gender studies can be told, engaging with Wendy Brown’s (2005) insistence on critical theory in dark times, as well as Cultural Studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg’s (2018) discussion of an “optimism of the intellect”.

Materials and Methods

For this paper, we conducted ten qualitative interviews with scholars at Swedish gender studies departments/units. We chose to interview scholars holding senior positions, and not doctoral candidates. The reason for this was that we wanted to know how they discuss the current situation while at the same time being at least potentially familiar with how the research field has developed over time. At present, there are 12 departments or units of gender studies engaged in the Swedish National Association of Gender Studies (some are relatively large and others very small). During 2021 and 2022, the first author conducted ten individual interviews at seven gender units, most of

them through an online video device with a camera (due to pandemic restrictions). We chose to conduct most of the interviews at the larger units due to confidentiality issues.³ While an online device can provide a sense of security for the interviewee, it can be more difficult for the researcher to decode body language. However, we think that the analysis did not suffer from this. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees were informed that participation was optional and that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without indicating a reason. The interviews were conducted in Swedish in a conversational style and were semi structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014) around broad open questions such as: can you describe the status of gender studies, within the university, and in relation to the surrounding society? What is specific about the knowledge produced within gender studies? Have you or your department had problems with threats or hatred, and how has the university leadership reacted to issues of threats and/or the increasing delegitimisation of gender studies?

Some of the interviews were conducted with people with whom the interviewer was acquainted, and the conversations that took place could be seen as a dialogue in which the researcher was assumed to already have knowledge about the topic. Thus, the interviews contained a form of tacit knowledge, and taken-for-granted aspects did appear. However, we do not necessarily see this as a drawback; instead, this familiarity enabled the researcher to ask more informed questions from the “inside”, and hence we were able to analyse these taken-for-granted aspects of the situation.

In the analysis section that follows, the question of the “the status of gender studies” is analysed in depth. Through multiple re-readings of the transcribed interviews and searching for how the interviewees discussed the “now and then”, we identified four central narratives through which the conversations evolved. Other narratives did appear, but for the scope of this paper we decided on these specific stories because they revolve around the temporality of gender studies. They are primarily related to how gender scholars conceive of their situation. The first narrative is “*At the eye of the storm*”: *the current situation of gender studies*; the second is “*The future at risk: a pessimistic position*”, and the third, “*The progress of gender studies: an optimistic position*”; and finally, we identified a narrative that *balanced between optimism and pessimism*. As the interviews progressed, these narratives were constantly being negotiated and reflected upon by both the interviewer and interviewees. The research participants often expressed themselves in reflexive ways in relation to how to define the status of gender studies. For the sake of clarity, we have decided to separate the narratives into different sections even though the conversations were complex. This means that the narratives are not seen as fully coherent stories, and most interviewees related to all of them.

Anti-Genderism as an Affective Atmosphere

In this section of the paper, we present our reading of how gender scholars in Sweden tell stories about their own field and profession.

At the Eye of the Storm: The Current Situation of Gender Studies

One broad question that was posed to the informants concerned the status of gender studies, both in Sweden and internationally. In this part of the analysis, we focus on how the anti-gender discourse is constituted by gender researchers. One of the informants said:

It is, how should I phrase it, it's like an ideological wind that comes primarily from the right and it projects onto, one that directs itself against gender studies and gender studies has become a symbol of what is displeasing [...] Gender studies is definitely positioned at the eye of the storm. (Interview 8. Our translation)

Here, anti-genderism is articulated as an “ideological wind”. As with the weather, it is not fully predictable; when the forecast talks about unsettled weather, it might turn into a storm or might pass by as just a mild breeze. When answering the question about the status of gender studies, we thus found that the metaphor of an “affective atmosphere” proved to be a useful analytical tool. The affective anti-gender atmosphere creates a situation in which gender studies was understood as

currently being at risk. Most of the interviewees could describe at least one incident of threats or insecurity connected to gender studies as an academic discipline, even though most of the incidents had taken place historically, or outside of the university, and most of them did not concern themselves as individuals. The notion of insecurity being related to their work situation was made intelligible as a feeling of winds blowing around them. Noteworthy is that the research participants, with mostly majority background, might not experience the situation in the same way as non-white or migrant scholars. One of the informants also made it clear that if you are doing research on transgender issues or migration, for example, you might be more exposed to hatred than if your topic is general gender equality politics.

In the interviews, fear of the anti-gender movement was prominent. As Lena Martinsson writes: “It is perhaps understandable that many gender scholars fear the fear that the anti-gender movement produces. This, if anything, is a real threat to the academic freedom of all critical scholars” (Martinsson, 2020, p. 299). In our analysis, we understand this fear of fear as an affective atmosphere. While many scholars have discussed gender studies at risk in temporal terms (in relation to the past and the future), we also found that the interviewees differentiated in terms of spatial situatedness, in the sense that some rooms were seen as being more insecure than others. Several of the informants said that they did not participate in social media and felt as though that choice gave them relief. Some also explained that one must choose suitable occasions for participating in the media, since it might lead to comments on social media platforms. Forces from the outside attach negative associations to feminist research, and in the interviews liberal editorials and journalists were seen as the most prominent problem in this case in terms of how gender scholars understood their current situation. Paradoxically, the extreme right-wing movement was not often mentioned, although this would probably have been different had the interviews been conducted in late 2023 (after the extreme right wing managed to sabotage a course).

While most informants talked about anti-genderism as a problem that had worsened over the years, another position taken in relation to discussing the current situation for gender studies is that there might not actually be that much of a difference, comparing “then” and “now”:

I mean, of course I've noticed these attacks against gender studies . . . back in those days it was maybe [name of a Swedish researcher], who at the beginning of my career was lashing out against gender. Nowadays it's [names of journalists], both in debate articles and in the book. Of course, one can notice that there is a resistance and a questioning from those who have space in the public arena, and this can of course fuel the prejudices of others, about what we're doing. They've already decided beforehand, and of course one can notice this whole, the Sweden Democrats, the right-wing populist movement, but as such, I don't think there's much of a difference, compared with what it was before. I really haven't noticed that the climate is harsher now than before. (Interview 3)

In this example, we find an approach of stressing the links between then and now, rather than the discontinuities between them. The shared knowledge between participant and researcher shines through in that the details of what happened “back in those days” as well as what happens nowadays was not needed to explain. In the quote, we can also see how anti-genderism is constructed as a “climate” and that it revolves around the “prejudices” of journalists, but also the right-wing populist movement. The interviewee described how most of the people she met were interested in her research, and hence her workplace was understood as though it represented a calm site at the eye of the storm. Nonetheless, the perceived anti-gender atmosphere and the very uncertainty of current times seemed to construct gender studies as being in a precarious and problematic position, which called upon scholars to act in certain ways. The “eye of the storm” narrative revolved around a sense of having to be prepared. As one of the informants said: “I'm constantly prepared” (Interview 5).

The Future at Risk: A Pessimistic Position?

Other temporal claims were also made about the past and current position of gender studies which expressed a feeling of despair:

- It’s easy to become disillusioned these days. You’ve devoted your whole life to this form of knowledge production, and then it all goes to hell. This is how it feels right now, but. [...]
- You haven’t felt like this before?
 - No, this is like, no I don’t think so. I was more hopeful before, I think. (Interview 1)

The anti-genderism is somewhat taken-for granted in this excerpt since the participant does not explain the sentence “it all goes to hell”, and researcher does not ask about it either. This example conveys the resignation of the gender scholar subject in terms of what has been (a situation of hope), and how the situation for gender studies has turned out (it has all gone to hell), which not only places the subject in a pessimistic position, but also positions the whole existence of the field as at risk:

As a teacher I might be participating in spreading a more pessimistic understanding, but also, I reckon, a greater preparedness that we’re not living in this blessed gender-equal country. But, I mean . . . but one could contribute by doing things, by struggling for an alternative perspective, to show that it is important to have gender equality and so on. That it is important to have a discipline such as gender [studies], that we matter, to reduce the pessimism, that there is some hope after all. But it’s a heck of a difficult time to be optimistic in, overall, for all of us, I think. The climate, all the authoritarian movements, anti-gender, fact-resistance and everything, so it’s not easy for anyone. (Interview 1)

In this excerpt, the interviewee refers to the unpleasant (ideological) atmosphere (Anderson, 2009) that has come to envelop the country (“all the authoritarian movements, anti-gender, fact-resistance and everything”). The picture being painted is far from the idealized image of Sweden as a “blessed gender-equal country”. The story being told situates the field in an affective atmosphere of despair, but simultaneously some glimpses of hope are expressed concerning the possibility of contributing to an “alternative perspective”, which implies an ambiguous situation. The subject position created here is that of a teacher, and an activist, focusing on how gender studies is essentially political, and hence important.

Regarding imaginaries of the future to come, one worrying event was the upcoming Swedish national elections, which were to be held in autumn 2022, and their effect on gender studies. The future of gender studies was linked by several of the interviewees to the results of that election, and the risk of a new government being dependent on support from the right-wing extremist party (The Sweden Democrats, which also turned out to be the case). The new conservative, populist political order in Sweden was compared to that of Hungary:

What if we’ve been thinking that this won’t be so bad . . . it won’t be like in Hungary here in Sweden? Oh my gosh, that will never happen. It’s like with democracy, it’s easy to take it for granted. But, on the other hand, I don’t know. I have a hard time believing it, and then I don’t know if I’m only being naïve or if it’s a conspiracy, but I have a hard time seeing that they would attack academic freedom in such a way. It’s still a huge step to take. (Interview 4)

These narratives about Swedish gender studies and Sweden not being like Hungary in terms of academic freedom can be understood through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s elaboration of the *Hegemony of the paranoid reading* (Sedgwick, 1997). A paranoid reading is a theory of negative affect. Sedgwick shows that a paranoid position means that it is *anticipatory*. She describes it as though there must be no bad surprises, and that the paranoid position inhabits an aversion to surprise (Sedgwick, 1997). To analyse events from any other position but a paranoid critical stance has come to be seen as naïve, and thus conducting a critical analysis becomes equated to always anticipating the worst, as can be seen in the following quote:

The question is whether one is, one must ask oneself: Am I being too hopeful or too optimistic? Should I be more paranoid, you know, or not paranoid, but you get it . . . Should I be a little more suspicious? (Interview 2)

Thus, it seems that, discussing the situation from anything but a paranoid critical position requires excuses. While Sedgwick’s work dates to the late 1990s, her argument about equating paranoid readings with critical theoretical inquiry is still relevant. Sedgwick argues that a paranoid reading only seeks to prove that which we already know. The paranoid position is, above all, directed towards predicting bad news, and thus functions in a reproductive, rather than challenging, way.

A paranoid position is not inferior to other positionings, however, it is just that it might be problematic if this kind of reading becomes seen as the most legitimate (or as the only one). Sedgwick proposes a reparative reading, in the sense that our reading starts out from a position in which we already know that the negative aspects of the studied object are there, there is no need to unveil them.

The Progress of Gender Studies: An Optimistic Position?

The third narrative identified in the material centred around the progress of gender studies and how the discipline has become a *success within Swedish universities*. When we asked about the status of gender studies, many informants talked about the current situation within academia as being much better than when they started their academic careers, and that gender studies as a discipline is actually something of a success story:

I think the status of gender studies is high, because I think we have many who take our courses, and many who know that we attract a lot of research funding and that we have, we are international with many guests and so on. Yes, so here I think we have high status. (Interview 5)

This interviewee talks about their department as successful in receiving research grants, and that those academics who are familiar with the discipline regard it not only as legitimate, but also as having high status. Another scholar said:

Today in Sweden gender studies is a very established discipline. I don't experience it as being questioned in any broad sense within academia. Rather, we have a very self-evident place in Swedish universities. In that way, gender studies is a success story in the Swedish context. (Interview 2)

In several of the interviews, as in the example above, the need to position gender studies as a success story within academia was prominent, perhaps indicating an urge not to be defined as a victim, or as a way of not constituting gender studies as a specifically threatened area of research and avoiding portraying the gender researcher as vulnerable. Paradoxically, the paranoid narrative and the success story go hand in hand. Others talked about how having a gender perspective no longer stands out as being different:

I must say that working with a gender perspective has been de-dramatised a lot within academia. . . No one faints if you say that you have a gender perspective, even if it might not always be the best career choice. But it has, it has nevertheless become much more mainstream to have a gender perspective, even in other disciplines. (Interview 6)

The affective atmosphere surrounding gender studies is visible in the sense that, here, both the drama and risk related to gender studies is positioned in the past. Another informant reflected upon how gender studies was perceived as a very unstable, insecure place to be positioned when she started her career 20 years previously, but that today it is a successful discipline:

It will disappear as a discipline. I remember that many people said to me, "it's not going to be permanent". Many thought that it was a mayfly, it wouldn't last in the long run. [...] And actually, in retrospect, they proved to be all wrong. Gender studies rather just exploded and got much bigger and became established. (Interview 9)

In this example, the scholar was reflecting upon whether it really is worse today, and one could say that the narrative of the precariousness of gender studies has been present throughout its relatively short history as a discipline. For decades, the success story of gender equality has also flourished in Swedish politics and media, indicating that there is a form of "hegemonic feminism" (De Los Reyes & Mulinari, 2020). According to previous research, gender equality has a long history of being a consensus-creating signifier in Sweden, connected with national identity, and state feminism has been seen as desirable by almost all political parties (Alnebratt & Rönnblom, 2016; Carbin & Rönnblom, 2012; Tollin, 2011). The success story of gender studies can be read as part of this narrative of gender equality as achieving constant progress. Almost all the informants were

confident that academia and the leadership of the university supported them, and discussed how gender studies and gender as an academic discipline has gone from being viewed with suspicion by colleagues to being recognized as one legitimate area of study among others. We read this narrative of success as a way of restoring professional authority in relation to the current questioning of the value of gender studies outside academia. In a way, the success story creates a position of hope, and constitutes the gender scholar as a successful academic subject.

A Balancing Act Between Optimism and Pessimism

In the narrative of progress, and gender research as a success story, many of the interviewees seemed to oscillate between highlighting the progress of the discipline on the one hand, and relating to the external threats that they saw as being directed against gender studies on the other. One of the informants, for example, talked about how an extreme and stereotypical image of gender studies has become the enemy among extreme right-wing movements:

Gender has become like a swearword, [and] at the same time it's not. It's very fragmented I would say. (Interview 6)

This dual picture was touched upon in several interviews. One researcher related to this split reality, of being embraced while simultaneously feeling threatened:

Well, I think it's quite difficult, I sort of vacillate. Because in fact gender studies performs very well, it sorts of delivers, it's visible, presents a lot, and has a lot of co-operation (with surrounding society) relatively speaking, it's successful in attracting research funds, at least as much as others, sometimes even better, many times better than other disciplines. It's expanding [...]. This means that we don't feel we're being questioned. (Interview 4)

In the success story of gender studies, it is obvious that the backdrop to the question is that the field is somehow being questioned. The example above highlights that this interviewee was reflecting upon the status of gender studies in relation to an emotional atmosphere of anti-genderism, even though this problem is not mentioned in so many words. Anti-gender sentiment here becomes a silent backdrop against which the success of the discipline is measured. Against this backdrop, many of the interviewees also formulated how important gender studies is:

When I think about gender studies as a teaching subject, I think there's so tremendously much in society that demands this perspective, and also the way gender studies has developed over time, it's not just to say gender as men and women, but it's a much broader perspective taking into account inequalities and differences and injustices and such in society at large, and there are so many angles where gender studies makes a huge difference. (Interview 9)

The narrative of success indicates the feeling of being embraced, and being a successful discipline within academia, while simultaneously many of the researchers mentioned a feeling of unease about growing hostility in public debate (specific journalists, especially in local news), or on social media. One could also argue that Swedish feminists have remained attached to the idea of a continuous process of increasing gender equality, both in society at large, and in academia. Hence, a "crisis of hope" occurs when a political and ideological anti-gender atmosphere becomes more prominent, and this oscillation between hope and despair that is visible in the interviews could be read in line with this crisis of hope. As Laurent Berlant describes it, a crisis of hope occurs when people (in general) have remained attached to unachievable fantasies of, for example, upward mobility, equality, and job security, despite the fact that liberal-capitalist society no longer provides such opportunities (Berlant, 2011). The articulation of gender studies as an academic success story might thus be read as an unachievable fantasy.

Concluding Discussion: From a Crisis of Hope Towards an Optimism of the Intellect?

In this paper, we have discussed the storytelling of gender scholars when they focus on how the rise of anti-gender movements creates a precarious situation that produces a sense of apocalypse and a crisis of hope. Using the concept of the affective atmosphere, we showcase how the notion

of anti-genderism is ambivalent. At times, this affective atmosphere was understood as a material situation that needed to be dealt with, through discussions about locking the doors to the department. At other times, the affective atmosphere was seen as something far from the current working conditions in academia, where gender studies is an integrated and appreciated discipline situated among many others. Despite the fact that the researchers described the status of gender studies as stable, they also swung between optimism and pessimism. The precarious position of gender studies was perceived by some as a cause for pessimism, while some of those who argued in a more optimistic vein nevertheless worried that they might be being “too naïve”. We argue that this pendulum between optimism and pessimism, and the (former) optimism about gender studies that has prevailed in Sweden, can be understood as a “cruel optimism” in line with the work of Lauren Berlant (2011). She describes how people have remained attached to unachievable fantasies of the good life. Our analysis shows that gender scholars are attached to a narrative of progress, and we think that this might be read as an example of how gender studies scholars have been involved in a non-achievable fantasy of everlasting progress for gender studies. This means that Swedish gender scholars may have remained attached to an unachievable sense of inevitable progress, in terms of an ever-increasingly gender-equal society, and the status of gender studies being linked to this everlasting improvement. Such an attachment can be seen as parts of a narrative of progress depicting Sweden as the most equal and democratic of all countries (Swedish exceptionalism) (Habel, 2012). Paradoxically, this constitution of Sweden as “exceptional” in terms of gender equality is then used by the right wing (populist) parties (with anti-gender ideologies) to demonize migrants and other racial groups—those deemed “non-Swedish”.

While gender scholars have invested considerable energy in criticizing state feminism and the bureaucratization of gender equality, we argue that gender studies has nevertheless profited from being linked to both gender equality and a hegemonic liberal feminist agenda. The question then is how to create status and professional authority when gender equality is no longer seen as a consensus-creating signifier of “Swedishness” and progress. When anti-gender mobilization has occurred as an unforeseen critic of the global capitalist order (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018), contemporary left-wing feminism and queer politics find themselves in a “double bind” (Arruzza et al., 2019; Gunnarsson Payne & Tornhill, 2021), being trapped between neoliberal ideals of gender equality and conservative anti-gender sentiments. The question is: how should we as gender scholars react to this double bind? To draw a parallel here, maybe it is not such a straightforward path to argue for the value of gender studies through ideals of the established, neoliberal-capitalist meritocracy (the success story of being competitive and receiving external funding). Even though this dilemma was not outspoken in the interviews we would like to raise the question. While the position of gender studies is precarious, the question remains: how could/should gender scholars and other critical scholars relate to this vulnerability? Since the affective atmosphere of anti-genderism creates an ambivalent situatedness, it seems necessary to discuss how gender scholars can engage with it, and whether it is possible to cultivate a different present and future. It is important to reflect upon whether critical scholars can try to attach hopes and visions to other possibilities, and not to the hegemonic discourse of academic success as equated with neoliberal measures such as receiving research grants.

We would like to discuss how to avoid falling into the trap of being either too optimistic or too pessimistic about the current state of the art. Lawrence Grossberg (2018) discusses this dilemma and recalls the phrase famously used by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci: “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”. Gramsci argued that it was crucial not to fall into those banal, simple moods of either optimism or pessimism. He stressed that his own mind had transcended these positions, and combined them, with his mind being pessimistic, while his will was optimistic: imagining worst-case scenarios, but at the same time finding ways to act upon these. Grossberg argues that, on the contrary, we need to develop an *optimism of the intellect*. He argues that, under conditions of totalitarianism, it is necessary to think more and better, and that we need to believe that knowledge makes a difference (Grossberg, 2018, p. 9).

While such a project might seem at odds with the current situation, some of the gender researchers we interviewed were actually participating in constituting a position of hope related to the *knowledge production* of gender studies. Based on the findings from the interviews, we would like to suggest that gender studies *as such* can provide a pathway to knowledge production for hope through a diverse set of avenues for the production of such knowledge.

The hope lies in developing grounds for knowledge that can address the question of how gender studies can be part of a feminist story of counter-mobilization that seeks to create a new hegemony that extends beyond authoritarian illiberalism, capitalism, and neoliberal consensus. Likewise, Krizsan and Roggeband (2018) discuss the need to develop feminist responses to “backsliding”. This counter-hegemony cannot be built on arguments such as “gender studies is like all other disciplines” (see also Martinsson, 2020), or that gender scholars are good at receiving funding within neoliberal academia. Instead, we argue that we need to hold on to critical theory in line with how Wendy Brown discusses it:

Untimely critique insists on alternative possibilities and perspectives in a seemingly closed political and epistemological universe. It becomes a nonviolent mode of exploding the present (Brown, 2005, p. 14).

Critical theory in dark times thus affirms the times, renders them differently, reclaims them for something other than the darkness. In this sense, critical theory in dark times is a singular practice of *amor fati*. (Brown, 2005, p. 16). [*Amor fati* – love of one’s fate]

We would thus like to argue that gender studies could provide an opportunity for untimely critique, if that critique involves a problematization of feminism’s own entanglements in capitalist, colonial and heteronormative projects. What Grossberg articulates as an optimism of the intellect or Wendy Brown describes as untimely critique is what we would like to refer to as the capacity of gender studies to both criticize the various components of the anti-gender movements and simultaneously remain critical towards the ways gender studies itself produces knowledge. Despite the difficulties of staying optimistic, Clare Hemmings (2023) in, a similar vein, discusses how ways of resisting anti-gender sentiments can be articulated from within gender studies in terms of strengthening the theoretical tools. We therefore argue that there is an urgency to imagining and naming alternative possible futures, and that gender studies does not by default provide us with a utopian space; rather, we need to insist on the alternative possibilities that the knowledge production of gender studies can contribute.

Notes

1. The Swedish radio program Ekot had asked all newly appointed ministers in the cabinet if they were feminists (Aftonbladet, 2023).
2. For the purposes of this paper, we use the concept of affective atmosphere as an overarching term that signals how anti-gender discourse is a social force that surrounds its subjects. Emotions are part of how the affective atmosphere is understood by subjects. This does not mean that we consider the “affective atmosphere” as merely covering the emotional aspects of the anti-gender discourse, but rather the aim is to highlight how this discourse is both material and emotional.
3. Due to issues of anonymity, we will not disclose any other characteristics apart from the fact that we selected senior scholars for the interview study. Though, it can be added that Swedish gender studies departments are predominantly white, which is reflected in this interview study.

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