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ROUNDTABLE

Gender in Trouble, Gender in Transformation

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Introduction – Sarah Bracke

When the editors of *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) were preparing their volume, David Paternotte and I talked about what a chapter on the Netherlands might look like. We concluded that it would pale in relation to the chapters on France, Hungary, or Poland, as there was not enough material to write about. That conversation took place in 2016. Nearly a decade later, we have hardly had time to catch our breath between different instances of anti-gender attacks in the Netherlands. The last few years have been particularly relentless.

In this chilling intellectual and political landscape, the need for gender studies communities to think collectively and make the (paradigmatic, thematic, intersectional, interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and international) connections is particularly high. This need shaped the latest edition of the annual gathering of the Netherlands Research School of Genderstudies. On October 19, 2024, the NOG research day entitled *Gender in Trouble,*

Gender in Transformation was hosted by the Amsterdam Research Centre for Gender and Sexuality, and provided intellectual space for the next generation of gender studies scholars to present their work in progress. This day of intellectual exchange was opened with a roundtable discussion with three esteemed scholars based in the Netherlands who, in different ways, have been working on and confronted with anti-gender politics. This current article is based on this roundtable, and written together with the three panel members. The aim of the roundtable, as well as its subsequent publication, is threefold: first, to analyse diverse cases of anti-gender rhetoric in order to expose systemic patterns; second, to share insights flowing from our experiences with these diverse cases; third, to conceive of ways to navigate this landscape of anti-gender rhetoric, anti-critical scholarship, and anti-democratic processes. This last goal involves empowering the academic community to recognize narratives that strive to manipulate and divide, to counter such narratives, and to foster solidarity.

By way of introduction, I offer some insights into the ways anti-gender politics have been operating, discerning three analytically distinct modes, even if in practice these dimensions are often entangled. First, anti-gender politics advance through moral panics, which are deliberate attempts to arouse concern and fear over a social issue (Hall et al., 1978). Gender and sexuality have been prominent topics of moral panics: from the intensification of the 'war on woke' all around us to the high-profile whistle-blower case at the University of Amsterdam in 2022/23 that led to an investigation of 'wokeness' and academic freedom at the university (Bracke, 2024; Hertoghs, Isenia, Krebbekx & Roodsaz, 2024; Krebbekx' in this article); from concerted efforts to delegitimize LGBTQ+ acceptance in schools to the attack on the sex education curriculum *Lentekriebels* in the spring of 2023 (Krebbekx, 2025), from a general anti-trans backlash to the removal of the bill that would extend trans rights just before the new far-right government was installed in the summer of 2023. Moral panics revolve around reframing social reality and 'winning the hearts and minds' for that frame and the social order it represents. When the smoke screen of the moral panic evaporates, things always turn out quite different from how they were presented to be. By the time that becomes clear, political gain has been made, a part of the population has been harmed, and freedoms at large have been curtailed (Bracke, 2024b). Moral panics are a crucial part of the struggle for hegemony. Along the way, they criminalize a part of the population deemed responsible for the breakdown of the social order they are concerned with, and they legitimize 'exceptional measures', such as new bans, regulations, or laws that push against the edge of legality, or breach it all together.

Second, anti-gender politics proceed through attacks on academic freedom. While many of these attacks occur in more insidious forms in the Netherlands, dressed up in liberal language or indeed through moral panics, there are also more authoritarian interventions. The most conspicuous example has been Dr. Susanne Täuber's dismissal in 2023 (see Täuber in this article). Täuber's 'gender trouble' began with the publication of an article appropriately named 'Undoing Gender in Academia' (Täuber, 2020), which troubled university administrators. This high-profile case does not stand on its own. In a less visible manner, we see that 'killjoys' (Ahmed, 2023) in the fields of gender or sexuality, but also the study of race or decoloniality, get disciplined, intimidated, sabotaged, or gradually pushed out of the institutions in various ways, including more recently through the deployment of 'social safety' discourse against topics or (feminist and anti-racist) 'styles' that make others uncomfortable which is weaponized as 'unsafe'.

Third, anti-gender politics are also advanced through budget cuts. The far-right government in the Netherlands is proceeding with an onslaught on higher education through severe budget cuts. Besides being ill-advised, unwanted, and illegitimate, in economic terms, these budget cuts are unnecessary, Ingrid Robeyns (2024) convincingly argues. Rather, they represent a direct political attack on the universities, in the name of tackling 'political indoctrination', as Wilders' PVV electoral programme of 2023 puts it. Austerity measures, in other words, are deliberately deployed to discipline and reshape the universities, or in the cynical words of a PVV politician in the House of Representatives, the budget cuts are needed to 'provide educational institutions with an opportunity to rethink their priorities' (see Bracke, 2024b).

No doubt we will see more concerted efforts to delegitimize the critical study of gender and sexuality, and other critical topics that touch upon social inequality – such as race and racism, decolonialization, migration, Islamophobia, etc. – in the years to come. The very concept of gender is under attack, both as an analytical category as well as what the concept invokes and stands for. These political campaigns do not occur in a political vacuum, rather, they have an international context (see Adriano Habed in this article), sustained by a political economy of neoliberalism, with its power-evasive 'mainstreaming' of gender, of diversity, of social safety, and the political rise of the far-right, with its naturalization and essentialization of social inequality. With this in the background, we turn to the panelists' accounts of their experiences and analyses, followed by a synopsis of insights into modes of attack and possible strategies of resistance.

Writing/living the Dutch Chapter – Willemijn Krebbekx

I find myself reluctantly stepping into the role of an 'expert' on anti-gender movements. Although I had followed developments in other countries, I initially believed that the sexual politics of the Netherlands – shaped by sexual nationalism – would prevent anti-gender sentiments from gaining traction beyond small, conservative groups, such as religious or right-wing factions. For a long time, this assumption held true. However, by 2022–2023, I was compelled to engage with anti-gender mobilizations directly, both within my university and in my field of expertise: sex education.

The first case revolved around a whistleblower complaint at the University of Amsterdam. A colleague from the social sciences filed a complaint under the university's whistleblower scheme, alleging that 'wokeness' was undermining academic freedom and the quality of teaching and research, and he specifically targeted the concept of non-binary gender identities. His complaint triggered a media debate, parliamentary questions, and an external committee's investigation into the validity of these claims (see Hertoghs, Isenia, Krebbekx & Roodsaz, 2024).

The second case, is the anti-gender campaign against the primary school sexuality education programme Spring Fever in 2023. Although the programme has been in place for two decades, 2023 marked the first time it faced widespread backlash. This backlash led to death threats against employees at Rutgers – the Netherlands' Centre of Expertise on Sexuality – parliamentary questions, heated media discussions, and some schools withdrawing from the programme.

In this contribution, I share a couple of insights following my frustrations of dealing with these cases. In hindsight, many of these relate to one of the key strategies of the anti-gender movement: to cause uproar and sow doubt. Judging by the questions I repeatedly faced and the comments I had to address when discussing both cases with friends and colleagues, this strategy has been remarkably effective. My contribution is structured by the recurring comments I had to counter or questions I was asked.

1. 'There's no smoke without fire.' This sentiment surfaced frequently in reaction to both cases. While people often recognized that much of the rhetoric was exaggerated and likely included misinformation, they still tended to assume that the allegations had some underlying basis. Even critical scholars and colleagues, due to either limited information or a lack of direct engagement with the issue, were left with a lingering impression: where there's smoke, there's fire. They presumed that something questionable must indeed be happening in the field of gender and sexuality

studies. By casting doubt on the legitimacy and integrity of disciplines like gender and sexuality studies, anti-gender movements aim to weaken the public's confidence in critical research and education. This can create a ground for each consequent attack to be taken more seriously by the general public. Hence, we should focus on exposing the origins of the so-called 'fire' and making clear these are attacks orchestrated by anti-democratic or religiously motivated groups. These groups often operate with significant financial backing, aiming to undermine progressive advances in gender and sexuality studies under the guise of protecting traditional values (European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights, 2021).

2. 'But don't you think there is at least some biological basis for gender?' This question often arose in response to the whistleblower case and serves as a subtle yet powerful way of undermining the work done in gender studies. It reduces the complexity of the field to a simplistic straw man argument, making it both frustrating and challenging to counter effectively. The implication behind the question is clear: scholars in gender studies are out of touch with reality. It presumes a divide between 'common sense' knowledge, supposedly grounded in biology, and the critical, constructivist insights from our field. By positioning themselves as aligned with 'common sense,' the questioner indirectly dismisses our expertise. Moreover, this question erases the debates *within* gender studies about the interplay between biology, culture, materiality, language, and politics. These debates are conveniently ignored in such questions, which aim to delegitimize rather than engage. Showing where the questions come from (the anti-gender movement that paints our field as 'ideological') and what they do (misrepresent and delegitimize our field) can be helpful in establishing a 'new' common sense beyond gender studies.

3. 'We must take the emotions seriously.' I frequently encountered this advice in response to my earlier, admittedly flawed strategy of downplaying the cases by saying, 'This is a non-issue'. Simply ignoring or dismissing these controversies does not work. Instead, colleagues urged me and others to take seriously the emotions people experience in each of these cases (such as the anger/fear of transgender persons or identifications). Indeed, we should take emotions seriously, but not at face value. As critical scholars, we should attend to the politics of emotions and interrogate what they reveal about the broader cultural and social dynamics at play. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2004) teaches us that emotions are not generated from within but are shaped from the outside in. Similarly, Janice Irvine (2008), in her work on sex panics, reminds us that emotions should not be taken as representations of some 'authentic core.' Instead, they are *transient feelings* – deeply social and constructed within specific contexts.

Anti-gender attacks often evoke fear, anger, or moral indignation. These emotions are not random but are mobilized and amplified within larger political and ideological frameworks. Anti-gender movements strategically exploit emotions to rally support, manufacture moral panics, and delegitimize scholarly work. Taking the emotions seriously means analysing their function: examining how emotions like fear or outrage are used to serve specific agendas, such as anti-gender politics.

4. This is (only) about gender studies. Finally, this is a statement I did not encounter but that became tangible in the many silences. The answer is: yes and no. This reasoning allows colleagues from other, but related fields, to alienate/particularize what is going on and distance themselves. Gender studies is indeed at the receiving end of many attacks and has proven to function as a magnet: societal problems are condensed into a single idea and displaced onto what we call 'gender' (Butler, 2024). But these are attacks on all forms of critical thinking and on democracy *through* gender studies. To speak with scholars of the anti-gender movement Graff and Korolczuk (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022): 'anti-gender campaigns, which emerged around 2010 in Europe, are not a simple continuation of the anti-feminist backlash dating back to the 1970s, but part of a new political configuration' (p.1). We should broaden the view beyond gender studies here, to show that the field of gender studies is an 'easy target' but not the only one.

Developments in Italy – Adriano José Habed

Within the Italian landscape – a context where 'gender' has long been the catalyst of societal fears – the emergence of so-called 'anti-gender' movements dates to the early 2010s. When people first took the streets in France to protest 'gender', they understood this term as an 'ideology' (or 'theory') aimed at disrupting society and corrupting or indoctrinating children (Garbagnoli, 2017). In practice, the word became a banner to counter LGBTQ rights, gender-sensitive and sexual education, reproductive rights, and gender studies, among other things. The activist styles and strategies of the French protests immediately travelled to Italy, where they found a fertile ground to flourish, not least because of Italy's closeness to the place from which the discourse against 'gender' stemmed in the 1990s: the Vatican (Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017). Groups such as *Manif Pour Tous-Italia* and *Le sentinelle in piedi* began to organize several activities, including mass demonstrations, public vigils, and conferences held in the premises of local parishes.

Interestingly, Italy ranked (and still ranks) consistently low in terms of LGBTQ rights (ILGA-Europe, 2023) and reproductive rights such as the right to abortion were (and still are) hindered by inaccessibility, lack of information, and 'pro-life' values and policies (Caruso, 2020). What's more, the field of gender studies cannot be said to properly exist in a country where minority forms of knowledge are practiced within traditional disciplines and have no institutional recognition (Saraceno, 2010). This, however, did not stop anti-gender movements from countering feminist and LGBTQ constituencies on the ground of their alleged hegemony, whereas in fact it was those same movements that were becoming increasingly hegemonic.

After 2015 things began to change for the worse. Changing tactics, 'anti-genderists' became less active in the streets and began to work closely with right-wing politicians and public bodies, in the explicit attempt at – in their own words – 'contaminating' and 'fertilizing' the institutional life of the country (Prearo, 2020). To illustrate the complicities between anti-gender actors and local institutions, let me focus on the case of Verona. In the Autumn of 2018, I began my PhD trajectory at the University of Verona, where a research centre on the politics and theories of sexuality (*PoliTeSse*) is located. In Spring, *PoliTeSse* had organized a one-day conference on LGBTI asylum seekers, inviting researchers and civil-society actors to discuss the subject. The municipal council of the city, led back then by the far-Right party *Lega*, got to know about the event and urged the University to cancel it due to its 'polarizing' nature (Cossutta & Habed, 2021). The conference was thus banned from the University and held outside its premises. On that occasion, many scholars working on gender, sexuality, and migration showed up in solidarity with *PoliTeSse*. They kept meeting in the months to come and, together, formed the first Italian Network of Gender Studies, GIFTS, in 2019.

That same year, the municipal council of Verona welcomed the yearly edition of the World Congress of Families: a right-wing think-tank where politicians and intellectuals meet to discuss Christian values and combat the spectre of 'gender'. Two Orthodox patriarchs supporting 'family values', an MP from Uganda defending the anti-gay legislation in the country, the Hungarian minister of family, and several Italian politicians including the back-then minister of interior Matteo Salvini were among the speakers. Concomitantly, the local chapter of the *Non Una Di Meno* (Not One Less) transfeminist movement, which originated in Argentina and soon spread across the world, responded to the Congress with a massive counterdemonstration. While Christian conservatives were gathering in the city hall, queer and transfeminist folks were holding exhibitions and movie screenings,

listening to national and international guests, and marching through the streets of Verona in order to turn it into a 'transfeminist city' (Cossutta & Habed, 2021). Much like the birth of GIFTS, the juxtaposition of two scenes – the World Congress of Families and the much-attended *Verona città transfemminista* – was a powerful reminder that anti-gender discourses, while increasingly hegemonic in the public arena, are a reaction to major social, cultural, and political changes brought forth by the LGBTQ and transfeminist communities (Montalbano, 2019).

Today, the far-right political party in the Italian government, *Fratelli d'Italia*, is filled with anti-gender rhetoric. Its political leader as well as current prime minister, Giorgia Meloni (the first woman occupying this role in the history of the country) has famously stated that, as a mother and a Christian, she is committed to defend the family as an entity 'formed by a man and a woman' against the alleged threats coming from the 'LGBT lobby' (Rizzitelli, 2023). When it comes to gender studies, two attacks have recently occurred. In September 2024, some organizations – including a 'pro-life' one and, interestingly, a 'rad-fem' one – mobilized against a workshop for trans and gender creative children organized by researchers at the University of Rome-3 (Borrelli, 2024a). The Ministry of Education and several MPs quickly picked up on those critical voices and began an investigation to ascertain if the workshop was meant to 'indoctrinate' children – a curious quest, given that all possible ethical committees approved of the initiative. In October 2024, an MP of the *Lega* party, Rossano Sasso, attacked a researcher and teacher at the University of Sassari, Federico Zappino, on social media (Borrelli, 2024b). Sasso expressed his outrage at Zappino's course on queer theories, questioning Zappino's qualification to teach and finding the literature – especially, the presence of sexual-liberation theorist Mario Mieli in the syllabus – unacceptable. In response, a petition was started by the GIFTS network and articles were written to defend both Zappino from the ungrounded accusations and academic freedom from the threats of the political right.

I wish to close with a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly prominent in the Italian landscape and beyond: namely, the uncanny convergence – if not alliance – between some feminist strands and anti-gender discourses (Beck, Habed & Henninger, 2023). While in English-speaking contexts these feminisms are often labelled 'trans-exclusionary' and 'gender-critical' (Cabral Grinspan et al., 2023), in Italy they largely take two shapes: the kind of lesbian feminism that is practiced by the main lesbian organization of the country, *Arcilesbica* (Villa, 2024), and, what is perhaps the most visible form of feminism in the Italian public sphere, *il pensiero della differenza*

sessuale, internationally known as sexual-difference feminism (Casalini, 2024). I will focus on the latter, which has long been critical of 'gender' as a heuristic category.

In 2013 – that is, at the onset of 'anti-genderism' in the country – an interview of French sexual-difference feminist Luce Irigaray appeared in a newspaper owned by the Berlusconi family, which was titled 'without sexual differences humankind has no future' (Giurato, 2013). In it, Irigaray argued against people who, in her view, want to cancel men and women, use gender-neutral ways to address parental figures, and campaign for same-sex marriage. More recently, two philosophers based at the University of Verona and practitioners of *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, Adriana Cavarero and Olivia Guaraldo (2024), have published the book *Donna si nasce* (*e qualche volta lo si diventa*) ['one is born (and sometimes one becomes) a woman']. The title is an explicit reference to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, of which they intend to provide an interpretation. In their *Donna si nasce* (*e qualche volta lo si diventa*), Cavarero and Guaraldo (2024) acknowledge they are 'critical of those queer and trans movements and demands that [...] forbid us to state that there are two sexes, that want to replace "women" with "people with uterus", and [...] that are in favor of surrogacy" (p. 135, my translation). What I would like to stress is that such feminist thinkers as Irigaray, Cavarero, and Guaraldo are not alien to the field of gender studies but are part and parcel of it. Sometimes they have contributed to shape the concepts and theories that are taught and mobilized in gender-studies classrooms; sometimes they are colleagues and friends of the same members of the queer and trans communities they criticize. It would be too easy to only blame the collisions between these feminists' views and the claims of anti-gender actors onto generational gaps or differences of sort. I believe we need to have conversations within our field of study that are at least as uncomfortable as the convergences we are witnessing. And we need to acknowledge the points in which *our own* theories, discourses, and politics align with those promoted in anti-gender circles.

Developments Worldwide – Susanne Täuber

I would like to invite the reader to consider my dismissal by the University of Groningen as a symptom of broader structural issues that threaten not only academic freedom, but democracy itself. To effectively resist these forces, we need to look at the bigger picture emerging from numerous individual cases. I was dismissed on International Women's Day 2023 for publishing an

essay that describes how policies claiming to promote women's academic careers are undermined by daily inequality practices. The essay squarely fell into my expertise on factors that contribute to discrepancies between policies and practice, such as power differentials, hierarchies, dependencies, precarious labour conditions, and intersectional inequality.

The solidarity extended to me was humbling. Colleagues and students, both locally and globally, engaged in protests, issued open letters, collected thousands of signatures demanding my reinstatement, organized a fundraiser to help with the legal costs, and occupied the academy building at the university. Most importantly, and probably best remembered, was the social media campaign #AmINext? It clearly formulated the concern that what had happened to me could happen to any academic in the Netherlands who dared criticize university management and leadership (Schliesser, 2023). Countless similar cases from other European countries demonstrate the validity of this concern.

In Denmark, Maria Tøft, a first-generation political sociologist at the University of Copenhagen, was forced to leave her department[1] without finishing her PhD. Prior to her involuntary departure, she ran the hugely successful campaign #PleaseDontStealMyWork[2], with which she drew attention to the rampant theft of ideas, authorships, and wage that PhD students are confronted with. In the U.K., dozens of academics were made redundant[3] from the University of Leicester's School of Business. The initiative making them redundant was called 'Shaping for Excellence' and ominously targeted mainly critical management scholars and political economists who also happened to be active union members. In Switzerland, academics published an open letter[4] to share 'grave concern regarding the erosion of academic freedom and the increasingly anti-intellectual climate in Switzerland'. They particularly highlight the intensified attacks 'on the social sciences and humanities'.

Such attacks are by now widespread and common. Besides the dismissal of critical scholars, they include (threats of) lawsuits against scholars speaking publicly about sexual harassment and exploitation in higher education, resulting in the retraction of essential knowledge such as one of the chapters originally included in *Sexual Misconduct in Academia – Informing an Ethics of Care* (edited by Pritched & Edwards, 2023). Academics have also witnessed in horror how the editorial board of the journal *Gender, Work, and Organization* was taken over by business and management scholars[5] with no gender theoretical background. This led to the mass walkout of Associate Editors, members of the Distinguished Advisory Board, members of the Editorial Review Board, reviewers and authors for the journal. In their resignation

letter[6], they state that 'Wiley's recent actions are sabotaging 30 years of world class scholarship and the collective work of a community which has stood against oppression, injustice and discrimination for just as long. As the number 1 Women's Studies journal, Wiley's directive is a violent attack on the community.'

Apart from devastating the careers, health and trust of the academics that are victimized, the cases above have in common that they purge the universities of critical scholars, as the academics made redundant by Leicester aptly describe in their book *Shaping for Mediocrity* (Burell et al., 2024). Critical scholars are erased with a particular ferocity when their criticism targets their own institution – despite such criticism being covered by UNESCO's definition of Academic Freedom (1998, art. 27), which states that 'Higher-education teaching personnel are entitled to the maintaining of academic freedom, that is to say, the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, *freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work*, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies' (emphasis added).

In addition, attacks on critical scholarship overwhelmingly affect the social sciences, arts and humanities, disciplines recognized for their important role in democratic processes. The Council of Europe (2000), for instance, acknowledges that 'the social sciences play a strategic role in guaranteeing an informed public and in building a society based on democracy'. Importantly, they underscore that 'the process of transition from totalitarian regimes to democracy requires efficient and independent social sciences able to contribute to a true democratic citizenship'. Reversing this reasoning, the erasure of effective and independent social sciences that we are currently witnessing might mark the transition from democracy to totalitarian regimes. Such regression from democracy into tyranny is not hypothetical, but a real danger. In her essay 'Academic Freedom & the Politics of the University', Joan W. Scott (2024, p. 151) cites philosopher and psychologist John Dewey who was instrumental to developing and establishing the concept of academic freedom in the US. Dewey noted that, 'the right and duty of academic freedom are even greater' in fields like 'political economy, sociology, historical interpretation, psychology'. He stated that these disciplines, which 'deal face-to-face with problems of life…', faced 'deep-rooted prejudice and intense emotional reaction' because they challenge traditional beliefs and practices. Because of their important role, Dewey argued, these disciplines convey to students the relationship

between intellectual integrity and the values and practices of democracy, preparing them for the critical thinking required for democratic citizenship. To attack critical scholarship is to attack democracy.

From Modes of Attack to Strategies for Resistance: Three Suggestions

While our individual experiences and contexts vary, they show remarkable commonalities and converge in three observations: first, moral panics around gender and sexuality are fabricated and backlash is orchestrated by powerful and financially heavy conservative networks. Second, the attacks extend beyond gender and sexuality, reflecting widespread and professionally organized attacks on critical scholarship that are anti-democratic in nature. Third, resistance and solidarity are possible: examples can be found across disciplines, national borders, and theoretical divides. Along the lines of these three observations, we can craft and share strategies of resistance.

1. Resisting fabricated moral panics and organized backlash. We need to expose the conservative think-tanks, parties, and institutions that orchestrate anti-gender discourses and attack critical scholarship more broadly, as well as investigate their networks (financial or otherwise) to show how fabricating moral panics serves their political agenda. To this end, we need to recognize and possibly neutralize their strategies such as the weaponization of emotions and the fabrication of chaos and confusion. We cannot do this alone, especially when we are the ones attacked. This effort requires dedicated solidarity networks as well as high-quality journalistic and academic work. Concrete examples for this are the ERC-project RESIST[7], Sonia Corrêa's Sexuality Policy Watch[8], and Yàdad de Guerre's blog Playing the Gender Card[9].

2. Recognizing the anti-democratic core of the attacks and defending democratic institutions. As David Paternotte and Mieke Verloo (2021) point out, the attacks on gender are part of broader efforts at de-democratizing our societies. One of the best-known modes of attack revolves around 'dividing and conquering' – in other words, tricking people (and academics specifically) into thinking 'this cannot happen to me'. As our stories show, this is wishful thinking. It disrupts solidarity across disciplines and works as a catalyst for the deterioration of democracy in our universities and, eventually, in our societies. In his book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017), historian Timothy Snyder advises citizens to defend democratic institutions because they cannot protect themselves. Throughout history, people's overly

optimistic belief in institutions has proven wrong. Democratic institutions are made by people, which is why they have been destroyed by authoritarian rulers in the blink of an eye. We must then pick an institution we care about – a labour union, an NGO, a network, a journal such as *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, a Research School such as NOG – and defend it.

3. Practicing resistance and solidarity. We need to find a community of people we trust – our 'caring coven' (Utoft & Kongerslev, 2023), our killjoy community (Ahmed, 2023) – and, starting from there, we need to organize, support, resist. Learning from people and experiences abroad can be helpful. A trusted environment allows us to fight off attempts at delegitimizing our arguments. We must then protect our disciplinary integrity and insist on our status as experts, on our 'going through the discipline'. In the process, we must embrace difference and disagreement within our communities. Besides the 'divide-and-conquer' strategy, the manufacturing of one overarching enemy variously labelled as 'woke', 'genderist', or through any other conspiracist signifier serves to silence critical scholars through accusations of 'polarization' or being a threat to 'academic freedom'. Thus, we need to collect stories about the many ways in which our communities are silenced and erased from public debate. This can help us to debunk the myth that questions of gender and sexuality, or critical scholarship more broadly, are unscientific, ideological, even totalitarian. As we have shown above, the actual attacks on academic freedom and on democracy come from those claiming to be attacked. To defend academic freedom is to defend democracy, and when these two are undermined many more people are affected than just gender studies scholars. Conversations about how to keep ourselves and others safe without engaging in self-censoring and self-silencing should happen.

Conclusion

We are facing immense threats to the disciplines we love, academic freedom, and democracy. As we seem to find ourselves in the position of the canary in the coalmine, we should, from that position, proactively inform and educate the public about what is going on. Attacks on democracy might begin with gender and sexuality scholars, but they will soon affect many more segments in society – not least everyone working in the (critical) humanities and social sciences. A good start is opening the conversation in a journal like *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, which is what we are attempting to do. Soon, we hope to organize gatherings and workshops for our community to further develop strategies of resistance – and practice them hands-on.

Notes

1. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/campaigning-doctoral-candidate-resigns-hostile-environment
2. https://uniavisen.dk/en/pleasedontstealmywork-120-testimonies/
3. https://ulsb16.com/
4. https://www.academicfreedom.ch/#letter
5. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/mass-walkout-top-gender-journal-over-new-editors
6. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pa3CF2PJrpsUQ456lndk6JXJQubAJqAT7ua5YQeSZj0/edit?fbclid=IwAR1U17d2nfXrIGwyb1-DolAlDer8XKyPoeRVYJvr4lVz_sxgL3GKXH3Du5E&tab=t.0
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