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INTERVIEWS



THE CURRENT STATUS AND PROJECTED FUTURE OF GENDER STUDIES IN GERMANY

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNA-LIN KARL

Anna-Lin Karl agreed to be interviewed as part of a final project for a Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies course at the University of Cincinnati. Currently an assistant lecturer and first-year PhD candidate at the Humboldt University in Berlin in the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies, Karl is writing her dissertation on the topic of *Self-Conception and Structures of Gender Studies Today*. She has recently published the following professional articles, "Zur Rezeption der Kategorie Behinderung im Feminismus. Eine Betrachtung von 1970er Jahren bis heute" (The Reception of the Category of Disability in Feminism. A Consideration from the 1970s to Present) and "Streitschrift gestern, Zeitschrift heute? Diskussionen über die "schlangenbrut" mit Gender- und Theologiestudentinnen in Berlin" (Polemic Pamphlet Yesterday, Journal Today? Discussions about "schlangenbrut" with Gender and Theology Students in Berlin).

Both Karl and I believe that transnational cooperation is vital to the continued success of the justice project that structures the field of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and we hope that our interview will encourage others to work both across disciplinary as well as national boundaries to enhance reflection on Gender Studies programs worldwide.

FOCUS From your perspective, will Gender Studies ever be accepted as its own field of study in Germany and be provided the opportunity to grow and expand, or will this field have to remain internal to other departments in order to exist and survive?

ANNA-LIN KARL In Germany, there are already some structural configurations of Gender Studies, for example the *Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies* in Berlin. Admittedly, it is true, that the Center only has one full-time professorship of its own. The other professorships are affiliates (through secondary appointments to the Center) situated in other disciplines. Furthermore, Gender Studies in Germany are home to Queer Studies, occasionally also Disability Studies, but this is less often the case. In Berlin, questions of racialization, and Critical Whiteness are of a high level of importance. In the United States, these areas are, according to my

knowledge, separated at the university level. I, myself, am very hopeful, that Gender Studies will survive. However, the entire structure of higher education is changing in Germany, and Gender Studies may have to adapt to economization and (efficiency-orientation?). That is why in the future we have to increasingly question: “how can Gender Studies provide structural alternatives in Higher Education in Germany?”

FOCUS In response to your answer with regards to Critical Race and Critical Whiteness research in the United States, this is also covered heavily in Women’s and Gender Studies programs here, speaking in relation to the University of Cincinnati. Our program stresses the importance of intersectionality, although we also have separate programs that cater specifically to these issues, such as Africana Studies.

My next question is, what is the current status of postfeminism in Germany? Do many women believe that because of established quota systems and gender mainstreaming, that equality has been achieved and therefore no longer something of contention?

ALK I think that here you have to distinguish between politically active women, who continue to campaign in groups and Women’s Centers or in the University for the guarantee of Women’s rights and against sexual discrimination, as well as Gender Studies Students, who are equally aware of the structural anchoring of sexism, and beyond this are also aware of other forms of discrimination, for example, racial and age discrimination. Of course there are also women, who find questions revolving around equal opportunities and discrimination to be unimportant and who laugh at the feminist struggle and deem it unnecessary. That is to say, people who are politically active when it comes to questions of women and politics as well as Gender Studies students are aware of advancements being made, but are not simply satisfied with quotas. Whereas, apolitical women are more likely to believe that equality has prevailed.

FOCUS Has Gender Studies gained more significance for students in recent years?

ALK The field of Gender Studies certainly awakens interest in students; there are many involved parties. My own

observation is actually that Gender Studies no longer creates as much astonishment from those students who are external to the field. That is to say, more and more students are able to find points of interest and engage themselves in Gender Studies. Nevertheless, the outsider's perception of Gender Studies does not always correspond to that which actually happens internally; it is a rather truncated version of the field. Thus, there is need for further dialogue. This has been confirmed by one of the group interviews that I have performed within the context of my dissertation. Two female faculty representatives, who have only now begun working in the field of Women's and Gender Studies with the writing of their dissertations, reported on how over time they began to comprehend the complexity –or today we say the intersectionality- of feminist research.

FOCUS What can one do after completing such an academic course of study in Germany? For example, in the U.S., a person with a Gender Studies degree can find employment with an NGO, become a professor, or get involved in politics, among many other jobs that are open to graduates in the field.

ALK Yes, these are also potential areas of employment for Gender Studies students in Germany. Social work, work with youth, and journalism also come to mind. In any case, Gender awareness is integrated into every field of work, in which former Gender Studies students are employed, and that is certainly positive.

FOCUS Since you are a woman, do you find it difficult to navigate in a male dominated sphere? Is it difficult to be productive in the university setting?

ALK I have observed that a different atmosphere for dialogue dominates circles that are gender-aware. It is benevolently critical, highly global in orientation, and inquisitive, which allows one to work freely and intellectually. In other circles, I have different experiences. Here, the tendency is to avoid conflict and individuals are not as open to differences of opinion, or as is often the case, these differing opinions are not productively integrated into discussions, but rather silenced or even seen

as destructive.

FOCUS Are Gender Studies Centers financially supported, or is there still a looming danger that they could disappear at any point in time?

ALK With higher education transitions like that of the conversion to BA and MA degree programs, there is continually a fear of the programs being eliminated. Here at the Humboldt University in Berlin and in other German University cities, the transition has been completed and the Gender Studies department prevailed. Even so, Masters programs do not exist everywhere that Bachelor degrees in Gender Studies are offered. Furthermore, Gender Studies is not always its own field, like it is at the Humboldt-University. Although Gender Studies credits continue to be recognized in such instances, they are nevertheless, integrated into other fields of study. What is exciting, in my opinion, is a project at the Berlin Technical University, where a Gender Studies certificate is currently being developed that targets a natural science and engineering audience.

FOCUS I would like to thank you for your answers to my questions regarding the status of Gender Studies in Germany. I found your responses to be quite stimulating, and most of your comments confirm assumptions that I already had.

Vanessa Plumly performed this interview electronically on 12. 03. 2011
