

7 Defamation and the Grammar of Harsh Words¹

Sabine Hark & Judith Butler

The emergence of *ressentiment* that turns into support of authoritarianism is one of the most worrying developments of recent times. A harsh grammar and its corresponding registers of accusation and suspicion, of ostracism and defamation, are increasingly shaping the public code of conduct. Not least thanks to (anti-)social media, disrespect, hate speech, and threats of violence have become an integral part of civil coexistence.

The aggressive and intentionally hurtful debates over the rights of gender, sexual and other minorities, or the fair and equitable organization of gender in our society in general, or Gender Studies in particular, contributed significantly to this situation.

Debates internal to left, queer-feminist and anti-racist movements have not been completely spared from the epidemic spread of this “crude bourgeois attitude” (Wilhelm Heitmeyer, orig.: *rohe Bürgerlichkeit*) – a development that undoubtedly needs urgent reflection and criticism. It is therefore not without a certain tragedy that some writers who claim to be committed to critical reflection have latched onto precisely that coarse cultural formation and its own grammar of harsh words.

An example of this can be found in the edited volume *Beißreflexe*, published in the spring of 2017 by the Berlin-based gay-lesbian publisher Querverlag, as well as in a dossier written by some of the authors of that volume in the July 2017 issue of the feminist journal, *Emma*, the oldest feminist journal in Germany, edit-

1 This article is an embellished version of a shorter text Hark and Butler published in the German newspaper *Die Zeit* (“Die Verleumdung”, August 2nd, 2017). The copyright is held by Sabine Hark and Judith Butler.

ed by Alice Schwarzer. Under the guise of ruthless criticism, they participated with pleasure and prejudice, and without any reliable evidence for their views, in bashing Gender and Queer Studies. For the sake of a cheap, but ultimately costly triumph, they are willing to accept the possibility of alliance between themselves and those forces campaigning against the legitimacy of Gender Studies who are in most cases not interested in open, critical dialogue.

Apparently, anything can now be said, especially if it is untrue, provocative, and stokes a sheer delight in destruction. For instance, Vojin Saša Vukadinović's essay in *Emma*, "Nails in the Coffin of Feminism?" seeks to debunk the alleged theoretical errors and thematic aberrations of Gender Studies with unchecked fury and malice. He alleges that within Gender Studies censorship is widely practiced, that it supports bans on speech that he considers detrimental to an open discourse. He thus vilifies particular representative authors of Gender and Queer Studies, including the authors of this rejoinder.

Unequivocally, "Gender Studies" is presented as a monolithic entity that maintains a hidden sympathy with terrorism and barbarism, and we would apparently all be better off were it wiped off the face of the earth, returning us to something called feminism or women's emancipation (that is somehow conceived as an alternative rather than a regular part of courses and books on the topic).

An explanation of what this feminism is or should be remains vague, despite some occasional hints. Feminism, unlike Gender Studies, would be apparently objective and would seek to grasp empirical facts as they are, such as the worldwide degradation and deprivation of women's rights and the abuse of women. Unlike Gender Studies and its representatives, this other feminism would be willing to condemn jihadist- and Islamist forms of terror. (Gender Studies, the monolith, is outrageously figured as amoral on such question.) Whether feminism should also now take on the form of vitriolic polemic which delegitimizes a complex field of inquiry, as the *Emma* dossier does, remains unclear. The question would also be whether the author himself proceeds in the objective fashion he perceives as missing in Gender Studies. Does he provide empirical evidence for his conclusions, or does he rather traffic in accelerating modes of toxic caricature and denunciation? If it is the case that the author advocates for more objective and empirically founded research, as well as well-grounded moral judgments on contemporary forms of violence, then what the article calls for, and what it actually performs, are in clear contradiction with one another.

But perhaps contradiction and innuendo are now in vogue, part of the new grammar and the new toxic cultural ethos. It would seem that the article faults

contemporary German Gender Studies for failing to produce path-breaking ideas and insights, and yet the article itself fails to suggest an alternative path or a new idea. If the wish is for an original theory that gains international attention, perhaps the author is asking that Gender Studies hold itself accountable to market values. Once again, however, the myth of an entourage of deluded “Butlerians” who supposedly dominate the entire field of Gender Studies is propagated, instead of tracing or even hinting at the field’s varied and complex intellectual movements and empirical research agendas.

In actuality, there are those who work within this field with “Butler” and those who do not. There are those who seek to shift the discussion of gender to sociology and economics; importantly, there is a trans* critique of Queer Theory. Furthermore, there are those who, from a natural science perspective, critically engage with Butler’s reflections on the relationship between *sex* and *gender*. Indeed, feminist work in Science Studies has complicated the relation between *sex* and *gender* in the aftermath of reductive causal models, and biology is now a field that has become an important one for feminists who work with the notion of gender. Decades of this work have concluded not that there is no biological *sex*, but rather that *sex* does not causally determine *gender*. There is an ongoing debate about whether or not “Butler” abandoned materialism and what she contributes to questions of global inequality, the militarization of worldwide conflicts, epidemic sexualized violence, the precarization of human existence, and more. And yet none of this turns up in the *Emma* article; instead we encounter, for the purpose of sensational effect, trite populist discourses and sleazy offensive rhetoric.

It is claimed that Gender and Queer Studies engage in forms of censorship, speech regulation, and the thwarting of expression. If this were true, it would undoubtedly be crucial to reflect upon, wherever it happens. But is the idea that free speech is the same as radically disinhibited speech? Should we, as feminists, engage in vitriol and caricature, give voice to every hateful thing we might feel, refusing all forms of scholarly accountability and reflection, and so follow the mode of the author of this *Emma* diatribe?

Doesn’t this essay model reckless and damaging speech that has no regard for the truth, despite its claims that feminism should become more “objective” and presumably more true? Worryingly, isn’t this a form of Trumpism installed into the field of feminism? Say whatever you want, insult or injure anyone you please, and do not worry whether what you say is true or whether it brings more damage into the world.

If this model of feminist freedom favored by *Emma* indicates the direction feminist critique should take, then we indeed have every reason to be worried.

For the feminism we know has, since Simone de Beauvoir, embodied a more considerate, contemplative and affirmative idea of freedom, one that is linked with a commitment to make a more equal, just, and free world. If to be “free” means to lose all accountability, to be free of the need to know or demonstrate the truth, then how will any of us responsibly take on the task of making the world more, just, equal, and free?

A Stance that Turns toward the World

Perhaps it is now the time to remember the basis of feminist thought and practice, one that instructed us to work persistently to realize in how many ways patriarchal relationships and obstacles materialize in the lives of individuals – and to resist these forces of reckless destruction no matter from which political direction they come. Undoubtedly, the author of the *Emma* diatribe is free to write his essay as he sees fit. But let us not mistake that form of freedom for the one that guides feminist struggles throughout the world since the call for freedom made by Simone de Beauvoir.

The 19th century feminist thinker Hedwig Dohm coined the term *Ver-säm-tlichung*, which names a way of conforming to negative attributions in the course of social subordination. This is, we argue, one of the basic rules of the harsh grammar now thoroughly adopted by some authors of the volume *Beißreflexe*. It is a mechanism aimed at eliminating internal differences and empirical complexity, pushing for homogeneity, abstraction, and indifference to difference itself. This is a violent form of thinking, abstracting from the complexity of a lived situation, that is neither about formulating a precise understanding of an issue nor taking a critical view of the limitations of one’s own perspective. It disregards the individual person and the circumstances in which they live, reducing the whole person to a set of conjectured traits, thereby consolidating forms of social prejudice for the purpose of rising morally above those whom it seeks to demonize and hold responsible for the ills of society. In order to flaunt their own self-appointed moral superiority, these authors use a strategy that contributes to processes of de-solidarization, with fatal consequences for social cohesion on the left. By favoring righteous indignation over the exploration of the aporias of solidarity, they engage in the very business of repressive domination that they purportedly set out to denounce.

The truth is: we do not have time for dirty fights and fake shows of critique such as these. It may not come as good news at all, but the fact is, feminism is

confronted with several serious quandaries at the present moment. For example, the attacks against women on New Year's night in Cologne (2015–2016), which had to be denounced in unequivocal terms, provided an opportunity to mobilize concepts such as gender, sexuality and a certain notion of women's emancipation to justify racist or anti-Muslim policies of exclusion. So the question becomes: how to provide a framework in which both racism and violence against women can be co-articulated. Or: how to conduct a non-racist, anti-sexist discourse that is also a non-sexist, anti-racist discourse? The magazine *Emma* seems here to suggest that we should engage in the condemnation of non-Western, Muslim migrants as a group, since concerns about the increase in racism distract from the only actual events of interest to women – that is, the sexualized violence against women by migrant men. It does not seemingly matter whether we find violence against women in traditional German households or that a vast number of migrant men do not engage in violent acts of this kind. There is no room to study actual reality when the diatribe is so urgent and apparently so exciting. This 'feminism' thus abandons the vital intellectual labor needed to understand the reasons that women give for wearing a hijab, or the vocabulary that human rights organizations use to speak about African women and genital cutting, substituting understanding for blanket condemnation, thereby elevating uninterrogated Western values in shrill and unapologetic ways.

So whatever feminism *Emma* has in mind, it seems to be a feminism that has no problem with racism or is not ready to condemn racist, imperialist forms and practices of power. This is a rather narrow feminism that assumes white privilege, one that does not seek to expand its understanding of axes of inequality nor bonds of solidarity. To the degree that it operates through slur and ungrounded denunciation, it hardly offers a path-breaking vision for the future.

Therefore, what is urgently needed, and what the texts of the *Beißreflexe* volume and the *Emma* Dossier fail to provide, is the cultivation of an ethical and political stance that turns to the world and relinquishes epistemological and moral arrogance. A stance that, unlike the steadily increasing din of bogus media debates which undermine the conditions of democratic deliberation, relies rather on the virtues of diversity and the de-escalation of hostility. A stance which deals critically and with reserve sweeping generalizations and selects terminology that facilitates the expression of ambivalences. A stance which rejects totalizing and overgeneralizing (*versämtlichen*) perspectives that call upon us to conform to empty rhetoric, enabling rather a thinking with the world rather than only thinking about it from a spectatorial distance. A stance that knows the difference between empirical certainties and normative judgments, and in which slow

and cautious analysis is more important in the end than the production of an ephemeral scandal that sells a few copies.

It is one of the most pressing tasks of our world at present to find opportunities to live with others and share the world without wiping out the otherness of others, but also without denying the undoubtedly persisting quandaries that have and will emerge along the way. Precisely for this reason, we have no choice but to provincialize our own position and explore possibilities of solidarity across difference. That path is very different from cultivating excited forms of self-righteousness that seek the buzz, the scandal, the outrage, whatever the cost to truth, to life, and to the future of society. The real tragedy of *Emma* and *Beißreflexe* is that they succumbed to these ultimately narcissistic preoccupations, missing the chance to engage a world that demands our best thinking at this time. Unbridled and unknowing condemnation can be exhilarating, for sure. But as Theodor W. Adorno already knew, “the true injustice is always located at the place from which one blindly posits oneself as just and the other as unjust”.

Authors

Judith Butler is Maxine Elliot Professor in the Departments of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. Her books include such influential and internationally discussed works as *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993), *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative* (1997), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (2000), *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005; first published in 2003 in German under the title *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt. Adorno-Vorlesungen 2002*) and *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009). Her most recent publications are *Senses of the Subject* and *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (both 2015).

Sabine Hark is professor at and director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Women’s and Gender Studies at the Technical University of Berlin as well as a member of the board of directors of the professional society for Gender Studies, which she co-founded in 2010, and a member of the editorial board of the scientific journal *Feministische Studien*. She is considered to have introduced Queer Theory to Germany with her PhD work on *Deviant Subjects: The Paradoxical Politics of Identity* (*Deviante Subjekte. Die paradoxe Politik der Identität*, 1996). Hark also regularly intervenes in public debates, be it with columns in Berlin’s leading daily *Tagesspiegel* or with the best-selling volume *Anti-Genderism: Sexuality and Gender as Scenes of Current Political Disputes* (*Anti-Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, 2015), written with Paula-Irene Villa.