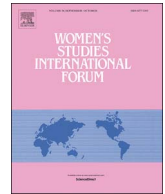




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Safety for whom? Exploring femonationalism and care-racism in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In Sweden, support for right-wing xenophobic parties and neo-Nazi inspired organisations are on the increase, and are connected with, and manifested through, an emotional regime of hate directed towards feminism and towards women embodying feminist agendas. At the same time, feminist-inspired concerns about gender equality are often mobilised and appropriated for racist and anti-immigration arguments.

The article explores this conjuncture between racism and anti-feminism as a political project, focusing particularly on how anti-feminist agendas act upon notions of *trygghet* (safety) and connects these to a nationalist and racist agenda. The article also explores the diverse ways in which self-identified antiracist feminists, many of them with migrant backgrounds and/or identifying as queer, confront these attacks and struggle for alternative understandings of safety that transcend hetero-patriarchal and ethno-nationalist agendas.

1. Introduction

The increasing support for right-wing xenophobic parties and ideologies throughout Europe is part of a radical shift in cultural hegemony regarding worldviews, particularly the dismissal of feminist inspired public agendas for social justice (Ferber, 2000; Gingrich & Banks, 2006; Keskinen, 2011; Meret & Siim, 2013). In many ways the recent developments in Sweden regarding support for extreme-right and racist political movements follow European trends, but Sweden can also be understood as exceptional in a couple of ways: firstly, by considering the way in which these antifeminist trends coincide with a context of an institutionalised state feminism regulating gender equality policies (Martinsson, Griffin, & Giritli-Nygren, 2016) and secondly, by taking note of the level of violence through which this antifeminism is expressed, articulated and acted upon (Hirvonen, 2013; Kolankiewicz, 2015).

The expanding support for racist agendas, mirrored among other things by the electoral success of the xenophobic, right-wing, anti-feminist party, the Sweden Democrats (SD) (Rydgren, 2006; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2017), has become increasingly connected with, and manifested through, an emotional regime (Ahmed, 2004a) of hate towards feminism and towards women embodying feminist agendas (Eriksson, 2013). At the same time, feminist-inspired concerns about gender equality are often mobilised and appropriated for racist and anti-immigration arguments (de los Reyes, Molina, & Mulinari, 2002).

Reflecting a concern with these developments, this article will explore antifeminism as a political project focusing particularly on the

ways in which antifeminist agendas act upon notions of gender, nationhood and discourses on women's safety. We will analyse the diverse and often contradictory notions of safety that are articulated in these agendas, and argue for the centrality of the term *trygghet* (safety) in order to explore different approaches to boundaries, bodies and belonging. Finally, we will also explore the diverse ways in which self-identified antiracist feminists – many of them with migrant backgrounds and/or identifying as queer – confront these attacks and struggle for alternative understandings of women's safety that transcend hetero-patriarchal and ethno-nationalist agendas.

1.1. Methodological reflections

The reflections and the analysis that follow use a patchwork method in the process of bridging empirical material from different sources (Ball, 2008; Flannery, 2000). Firstly we will provide analyses of two different kinds of text: The first text we look at is the 2016 programme from the Sweden Democrats (SD) Party; we focus on their approaches to notions of *trygghet* (security). Following from this we turn to debate and opinion articles published in both extreme-right and mainstream media during the “solidarity crisis” that rolled out across European borders in 2015/2016. The analysis of the articles offers an illustration of the ways in which femonationalist (Farris, 2017) expressions can be traced along a political spectrum that is broader than the SD alone. The articles exemplify the ways in which gender equality, migration and racism tend to be mobilised and put in tension with each other (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Secondly, we provide a thematic analysis of twenty-five

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in-depth interviews conducted with young women, most of them with migrant backgrounds. These women identify themselves as antiracist feminists and are active in mobilisations and demonstrations against neo-Nazi and Sweden Democrat events in public spaces. The interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2014, and participant observation took place in the city of Malmö, Sweden's third most multicultural city, with more than 50% of its residents being either immigrants or children of immigrants. Malmö has been pointed out by right-wing xenophobic parties and by neo-Nazis, both in Sweden and abroad, as a symbol of the chaos and disaster they claim as the result of immigration and multiculturalism.¹ The city also has a long tradition of political activism and civil society organisations searching for diverse forms of social justice. In the final analytical section, we offer examples of ways in which feminists have tried to actively contest femonationalist tendencies.

Feminist scholars have convincingly argued that issues of positionality are central in the development of forms of critical knowledge that expand traditional notions of neutrality and objectivity. Due to the political sensitivity of the issues analysed, we therefore believe it is important to provide some clues about our own location. We, in common with many other feminist, antiracist activists, have participated in demonstrations aimed at reducing the neo-Nazi and racist presence in the places we call home. Since the “solidarity crisis” 2015/2016² we, as again have many other feminist antiracist activists, have participated in networks, events and mobilizations that confront the Swedish government's refugee policies. In addition, and again with an experience common among many feminist scholars, we know we run the risk of receiving threatening phone calls and emails every time we go public with our research.³

We follow the tradition of black feminist activists and scholars (Collins, 2012) accepting the challenges and the dilemmas of both taking sides (Armbruster & Laerke, 2008) and producing knowledge that is vital for our communities. In trying to analyse structural constraints we also, and particularly, hope to identify the forms of agencies, fractures and ruptures that could be opened up to create pathways towards different futures.

2. Sweden, gender equality and the radical transformation of the ‘Nordic’ model

The ‘Scandinavian’ or ‘Nordic’ model has been analysed in feminist scholarship not only in relation to its welfare regime, but also in relation to what has been conceptualized as ‘women friendly’ welfare states (Hernes, 1987). The establishment of public policies facilitating women to combine paid labour with family life was, to a certain extent, inspired by a political project of state feminism (Borchorst & Siim, 2008). Sweden also became known as a model multicultural welfare state which extended citizenship, welfare and labour rights to all residents within its borders (Schierup, Hansen, & Castles, 2006).

However, in the 1990s, and as a response to the global financial crisis, social democratic governments introduced measures that decreased both social benefits and resource allocation in public welfare institutions. In 1991, a centre-right-wing government took power (re)affirming neo-liberal concepts such as ‘freedom to choose’ and ‘flexibility’ (as opposed to the alleged rigidity of welfare service provision hitherto) (Boreus, 1997; Selberg, 2012). This shift in welfare policies has gone hand in hand with discourses that represent migrants as a

burden on the welfare state and as failing to identify with ‘western values’ (Hübinette & Lundström, 2011; Mulinari & Lundqvist, 2017), as well as with the introduction of more restrictive migration controls that have radically changed migrant and refugee rights (Sager, 2011).

Right-wing xenophobic movements and related political parties have been gaining ground in many European countries, including Sweden (Fekete, 2012; Wodak, Khosravini, & Mral, 2013). While this is not a new phenomenon in Sweden, support for organisations framing nationalist and racist discourses has been marginal in the political and public arena for most of the post-war period. However, starting in the late 1980s, an increase in the public visibility of neo-Nazi activities was followed by the emergence of New Democracy, a populist anti-immigration party, and the creation and establishment of the SD. The SD is often conceptualized within political science as belonging to the family of European populist radical right parties (Rydgren, 2006). However, other scholars have identified the party as being racist (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2017) or fascist (Arnsted, 2014) with its historical roots in the neo-Nazi social movements of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

From a perspective which takes in both the dismantling of the welfare state, and a growing support for ideologies that carry the misogyny implicit in traditional gender ideals at their core, we would argue for the necessity of interrogating the ways in which notions of ‘gender equality’ and *trygghet* (safety) are created as a Swedish national characteristic.

2.1. Exploring care racism, femonationalism and notions of *trygghet* (safety)

Social anthropologist Gloria Wekker (2004) suggests that the cultural archive passed to future generations of feminist scholars needs to be (among other things) transnational and intersectional. Such a transnational focus entails underscoring the roles women are made to play in the symbolic construction of the nation and its boundaries, as well as being attentive to the ways in which these constructions are coded through classificatory systems based on race, sexuality and notions of fixed national cultures (McClintock, Muffi, & Shohat, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 2011). A transnational focus in the Swedish context would also need to address and identify Sweden's complicities with European colonialism (Keskinen, Irni, Touri, & Mulinari, 2009) as well as the centrality of this historical legacy in order to better understand the Swedish racial regime and its diverse forms of gendered racism (Habel, 2015; Molina, 2007; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2017). Further, a transnational focus would identify the continuity between Swedish hegemonic feminism and colonial legacies as well as racist genealogies (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Scott, 2004). We use the concept of hegemonic feminism to describe a form of feminism framed in the tradition of Western feminism, powerfully located within the privileges of whiteness, and fundamental in the creation of the category of migrant women in need of rescue from violent patriarchies located outside Swedish national boundaries.

Following the work of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1998), an intersectional framework makes possible an analysis of the ways in which notions of the family as embodied by the heterosexual couple naturalises – in the name of love and protection – hierarchies of gender, age and sexuality that are in turn interwoven with racial hierarchies. It also allows for an understanding of the ways through which, in Sweden, hetero-femininity is acted upon through notions of whiteness (Mattson, 2010). Postcolonial scholars in Sweden argue that these notions create a coding of the category of ‘women’ as white (and ‘Swedish’), as powerful, autonomous and closely identified with gender equality. Thus, in all ways this construction of Swedish women contrasts with the construction of their oppressed third-world migrant sisters. This imagined category of ‘women’ is described as being vulnerable in only one way: this is in relation to the threats of supposedly dangerous, and most particularly black and Muslim, migrant men (Eliassi, 2015).

In nationalist imaginaries women are understood as embodying the

¹ For example, British UKIP party leader Farage claimed in 2016 that Malmö is Europe's “rape capital” (“Reality Check: Is Malmö the ‘rape capital’ of Europe?” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39056786> (Accessed 2017-05-17).

² We use the term “solidarity crisis” following European social movements struggling for migrant rights that have challenged Eurocentric discourses using the term “migration crisis” to describe recent years migration to Europe. The term solidarity crisis grasps the centrality of centering the debate on migration in terms of social justice.

³ <http://www.genus.se/nyhet/hot-och-hat-drabbar-den-kritiska-forskningen/> Threats and hate against critical research. (Accessed 2017-05-08).

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