Post-feminist German heartland: On the women’s rights narrative of the radical-right populist party Alternative für Deutschland in the Bundestag

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Abstract
This essay sketches out the post-feminist narrative employed by the radical-right populist party Alternative für Deutschland in the German national parliament between October 2017 and July 2018. Striving to establish a hegemonic ontology, the Alternative für Deutschland conjures up a social imaginary of a German heartland, where equal rights between ‘naturally’ different women and men have long been achieved – a heartland that has to be protected from ‘Muslim culture’ as much as from the ‘leveling down’ imposed by a ‘radical feminist elite’. Between these frames, the Alternative für Deutschland presents itself as the only true champion of women and, while never asserting to be feminist, implicitly lays claim to a particular and exclusivist post-feminist position. I argue that the Alternative für Deutschland’s capabilities to promote this populist narrative have become further enhanced by its election to the national parliament, presenting a serious challenge and also a chance for German feminism to self-critically engage with issues of intersectionality and representation in public discourse.

Keywords
AfD, feminism, Germany, populism, radical-right, women’s rights

On 1 March 2018, Nicole Höchst, a female delegate of the radical-right populist (RRP) Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party in the German Bundestag, speaks on the occasion of the upcoming World Women’s Day, describing it as an ‘achievement from times in
which feminism was still [politically] left’ (Bundestag, 2018: 1386; 19/7, own translation). This statement might first seem odd, but it is symptomatic of a fundamental struggle over hegemony in public discourse – not only in Germany – in which RRP actors increasingly co-opt and subvert feminist issues. Across Europe, women’s rights are instrumentalized to push for Islamophobic anti-immigration and assimilationist policies (Fekete, 2006). Also, women’s ‘natural’ self-determination is brought into position against the ‘gender ideology’, allegedly embodied in a progressive gender equality policy (Hark and Villa, 2017). In this essay, I show that the employment of such ‘post-feminist common sense narratives’ (Boulila and Carri, 2017: 286) is a strategic and defining feature of the AfD delegate speeches in the German national parliament. Striving to establish a hegemonic ontology, the AfD conjures up a social imaginary of a German heartland, where equal rights between ‘naturally’ different women and men have long been achieved – a heartland that has to be protected from ‘Muslim culture’ as much as from the ‘leveling down’ imposed by a ‘radical feminist elite’. Between these frames, the AfD presents itself as the only true champion of women and, while never asserting to be feminist, implicitly lays claim to a particular and exclusivist post-feminist position. I argue that the AfD’s capabilities to promote this populist narrative have become further enhanced by its election to the national parliament, presenting a serious challenge and also a chance for German feminism to self-critically engage with issues of intersectionality and representation in public discourse.

### Populism and hegemony

Following Brubaker (2017), I define RRP as the polarized opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in both vertical and horizontal dimensions. The constitutive element of populism, as such, is the vertical opposition between two homogeneous groups: ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ (see also Mudde, 2007). The common people are imagined as ‘virtuous, struggling, hard-working, plain-spoken, and endowed with common sense’, whereas ‘the elite’ are seen as ‘corrupt, self-serving, paralyzed by political correctness, and, above all, out of touch with or indifferent to the concerns and problems of ordinary people’ (Brubaker, 2017: 1192). In case of the radical-right (RR), an additional horizontal opposition is drawn between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, where the shared way of life inside the homogeneous nation is said to be threatened by outside elements (Brubaker, 2017: 1192). The ‘inside’ in RRP is an imaginary construct of belonging that is often defined along national borders and in opposition to immigrants; however, the ‘outside’ can also comprise inhabitants/citizens of the state as ‘internal outsiders’, ideas, processes, institutions, and so on. Thus, populists identify with an idealized conception of the community they serve, which Paul Taggart (2004) calls the ‘heartland’. ‘The elite,’ and this point is crucial, are also part of the outside, because they are seen as politically unrepresentative, economically detached, and culturally uprooted. Yet ‘the elite’ are additionally ‘on top’ because they are characterized as having the power to impose a different way of life on the heartland – for example, by allowing immigration or fostering multiculturalism (Brubaker, 2017: 1192). As the heartland is ‘something that is felt rather than reasoned, and something that is shrouded in imprecision’ (Taggart, 2004: 274), RRP parties evoke imaginary heartlands along many, often contradictory dimensions, unifying their constituency by presenting ‘us’ and ‘them’ as mutually exclusive categories.
Several scholars have argued that inserting such an essentializing narrative into the public discourse is capable of establishing hegemony in a Gramscian sense (Dietze and Roth, 2020; Kováts, 2018; Yılmaz, 2012, 2015). Hegemony does not mean that the RRP narrative presents a dominant and inescapable idea. Instead, the articulation of what are deemed ‘common interests’ of the heartland leads to the formation of a new imaginary political and social entity that changes the ontological order, the way we think about reality (Yılmaz, 2015: 39).

German public discourse and the emergence of ‘post-feminist common-sense’ narratives

For a long time, the populist opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ was framed in ethnonational and cultural terms across Europe, mostly focused on the social and economic aspects of immigration and immigrant integration (Yılmaz, 2015). In Germany, the ‘them’ was usually the largest Turkish minority (Yildiz, 2009). Yet, the framing shifted significantly as a result of increased Muslim refugee migration, global visibility of political Islam, and the events and aftermath of 9/11. The ‘war on terror’ and the entailed references to Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis established a new binary between ‘Western’ values and those of ‘Islam’ (Fekete, 2006: 8), a binary that was considerably pushed by the political right and moved center stage in the political and public discourse. By pitting European liberal achievements against the illiberalism and regressiveness assumed to be inherent in Islam, the perception of ‘cultural sameness vis-à-vis Muslims’ became increasingly salient across Europe (Yılmaz, 2015: 37). In the process, ‘immigrants’ were relabelled and recast as ‘Muslims’, religion representing the primary category of identification since around 2000 in Germany (Yildiz, 2009). Reinforcing this shift was the official recognition by the government that Germany was an immigration country, followed by the introduction of a new ‘Integrationsgesetz’ in 2005 and the organization of meetings under the title ‘Islamkonferenz’ with ‘Muslim’ representatives between 2006 and 2009 (Yildiz, 2009).

Though not uncontested, the essentializing religious narrative transcended classic political divisions. It was famously picked up by social democrat Thilo Sarrazin (2010) in his best-selling book, Germany Abolishes Itself, in which he problematizes the social and economic integration of Muslim immigrants living in ‘parallel societies’ (Parallelgesellschaften).1

In the public discourse in Germany (and Europe in general), religion also became an increasingly important marker of cultural difference in reference to gender and sexuality, particularly in stories about female victimhood, including genital mutilation, forced (child) marriages, honor killings, domestic violence, or religious practices like public-veiling (Fournier and Yurdakul, 2010; Korteweg and Yurdakul, 2010; Yildiz, 2009, 2011). Yasemin Yildiz (2009: 475) shows this by comparing two articles of the influential liberal weekly magazine Der Spiegel from 1990 and 2004: ‘By changed interpellation alone’ (from ‘Turkish’ to ‘Muslim’), women’s rights function as a normalizing vehicle for a culturalized projection of a threatening Islam and Muslim male other. In the essentializing juxtaposition to ‘Islam’, ‘the West’ is not only claimed to offer a more emancipatory outlook, female emancipation becomes an issue of nation state security, state sovereignty and secularism (Reilly, 2011). Remarkably, in what Sara Farris (2012) termed ‘femonationalism’, feminist and racist arguments come together to call for
anti-immigration and assimilationist policies, seamlessly connecting to RR agendas. In Germany, among the most vocal proponents of such positions have been the feminist Alice Schwarzer (publisher of the magazine *Emma*), the sociologist Necla Kelek, and the Turkish-German lawyer Seyran Ateş. As ‘Islam critics’ and proponents of a ‘liberal Islam’, the Muslim women Kelek and Ateş participated in the ‘Islamkonferenz’ and have even been awarded national honors; all the while substantially contributing to an alleged binary between ‘European’ and ‘Muslim’ values (Yildiz, 2011). Anti-racist feminist voices, although present, struggled to make themselves heard in the public discourse. As Susan Rottmann and Myra Marx Ferree (2008) illustrate using the examples of antidiscrimination legislation and the headscarf debate in the 2000s, German feminists were unable to ‘form a strategic alliance that did not privilege “Germanness”’ (p. 487).

The culturalized immigration discourse was particularly reinvigorated by the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in 2015, when Germany received over a million immigrants mainly from Muslim majority states. Women’s rights as issues of cultural contestation moved center stage again after the events on New Year’s Eve 2015 in Cologne. On that night, a mass sexual assault happened around the Cologne cathedral and central station that was attributed to several hundred presumably North African refugees. Mainstream media outlets, politicians, and anti-Muslim pundits were quick to classify the events as an attack on ‘Western’ emancipation and freedom, and the inevitable result of the ultimately failed German *Willkommenskultur* and multiculturalism (Boulila and Carri, 2017). For example, Schwarzer (2016) attributed the ‘Gang-Bang-Party’ to the ‘starry-eyed import of male violence, sexism and antisemitism’ (own translation). This time anti-racist feminists were able to vocally join the debate, such as the feminist online collective #ausnahmslos (2016) (#noexcuses), among others launched by Anne Wizorek, Teresa Bücker, and Kübra Gümüşay. They criticized the sudden attention directed towards sexual violence in this racialized framing, compared it with the incidences regularly happening at the German Oktoberfest, and called for a long overdue revision of rape law based on the principle of ‘no means no’. However, in the ensuing aftermath, the #ausnahmslos collective and their followers and sympathizers were fiercely attacked, and their anti-racism and ‘political correctness’ were seen as ‘the real enemies of gender equality in Germany’ (Boulila and Carri, 2017: 289).

Boulila and Carri (2017) make a strong case that Cologne helped advance ‘post-feminist common-sense narratives’ in which emancipation was assumed to be a long-achieved, integral part of German culture, whereas ‘anti-racist feminism was denounced as ideological, extreme and dangerous for the nation’ (Boulila and Carri, 2017: 286). In the following, I argue that this ‘post-feminist common-sense’ is a defining element of the AfD’s populist heartland and its strategic orientation in the Bundestag.

**The AfD**

Although already accommodated in large parts of mainstream public discourse, Islamophobia became one of the sparks and a defining feature of a changing political landscape in Germany after 2010. Before, restrictive immigration politics were generally represented by the conservative parties Christian Democrats (CDU) and Christian Socialists (CSU), successfully marginalizing the radical right for a long time (Fekete, 2006: 5). In February 2013, the AfD was founded mainly as a reaction to the European
politics of the German government, particularly criticizing the euro bailout (Kleinert, 2018). However, initially consisting of a dominant neoliberal, a national-conservative, and an RRP wing, power struggles soon emerged and the party agenda shifted remarkably to the right. Since then, the AfD is generally regarded as an RRP party (Kleinert, 2018: 5). In the German national elections in September 2017 – becoming elected to all state parliaments in the meantime – the AfD was decisively successful, securing 12.6% of the vote and mobilizing 1.4 million non-voters (Blickle et al., 2017). Over the period of my analysis, the AfD held 92 of the 709 seats in the German Bundestag. The AfD is not only the first RRP party in the Bundestag, it is also the largest opposition party to a government of CDU and SPD (Social Democrats).

The AfD capitalized on growing anti-Islam sentiment in Germany, for example, by supporting the PEGIDA movement (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident) that mobilized up to 25,000 people at the turn of the year 2014 against ‘Überfremdung’ (foreign domination) in Dresden (Denkler et al., 2015). A chapter in the 2017 national election party programme entitled ‘Islam in conflict with the liberal democratic constitutional order’ invokes a scenario of impending destruction of European values by ‘non-integrable cultures and traditions’ and ‘religious imperialism’ (AfD, 2017: 33–47, own translation). In tandem with the AfD’s shift to the political right, women’s rights became programmatic in connection to anti-Islam, anti-immigration, and assimilationist positions (Lang, 2017). After the events in Cologne, the AfD was one of the most vocal actors condemning Muslim immigration.

By contrast, the AfD’s stance on gender and family issues has been quite stable since its inception. Initially firmly rooted in Christian faith, later with a stronger focus on Germany’s demography (anxious of ‘the great replacement’), the AfD sees the traditional ‘natural’ heterosexual family as ‘the nucleus of the nation’ (Kemper, 2014). It comes as no surprise that the AfD opposes abortion, divorce, and same-sex marriage, but they have also remarkably strong positions on what they call ‘gender ideology’ (Siri, 2016). For the AfD, ‘gender ideology’ is an elitist imposition that ‘marginalizes nature-given differences between genders and calls into question gender identity’ (AfD, 2017: 40, own translation) via ‘ideology instruments’ such as gender studies, sex education, gender quotas, ‘propaganda actions’ as the Equal Pay Day, and gender-sensitive language.

Clearly, this is a broad anti-feminist stance and I would argue that the AfD conceived itself as an anti-feminist actor. One of the striking examples of this conception was the online campaign of the AfD’s youth organization Junge Alternative in which members explained why they are not feminists, highlighting naturalized female roles or an allegedly existent equality of opportunity between men and women in Germany (Siri, 2016: 73–77). However, whereas the AfD’s positions on these issues have not changed, I will show that the AfD carefully avoids presenting itself as being outspokenly anti-feminist or not feminist in the Bundestag – a strategy that is instrumental and significant in the construction of a post-feminist populist heartland.

Data

To map the specific discourse as accurately and completely as possible, I choose a theoretical sampling according to the minimal contrasting principle (Keller, 2008: 91–92): I search
AfD delegate speeches for statements on the issue of women’s rights. The sampling frame comprises all 46-day sessions that have taken place in the Bundestag plenum in the 19th legislative period from October 2017 to the summer break in July 2018. Every speech is transcribed and published online by the Bundestag, allowing for a systematic text-based approach to identify relevant speeches. Altogether, the analysis sample contains 40 speeches by AfD members and some related speeches by delegates of other parties. Everything I quote from these speeches in the following section has been translated by me.

**Post-feminist heartland**

In the debate on World Women’s Day, the first two speeches were given by Katharina Barley (SPD) and Nadine Schön (CDU) and describe the German progress in terms of gender equality as quite substantial, both historically and in terms of the policies adopted in the foregoing legislative period under an SPD and CDU/CSU coalition government (Bundestag, 2018: 1384–1386, 19/17). However, both note that equality is still far from being achieved. Nicole Höchst of the AfD speaks third, a female catholic and teacher by profession. She begins by thanking her grandmothers, mother, and all ‘[female] fighters (Kämpferinnen) for women’s rights,’ before continuing,

Ladies and gentlemen, a reflection on World Women’s Day, an achievement from times when feminism was still [politically] left – let’s look back: our great-grandmothers’ generation gave us the overdue right to vote as women. The generation of our grandparents rebuilt Germany. They have given us back our homeland. They raised their children themselves, mostly on the side, without help or support.

The generation of our mothers has also made a big difference for us women. They have brought us the great freedom to be employed – without the permission of the man. They have brought us the self-determination and taught us to be master over our own bodies. They have truly enabled us to have equal rights as guaranteed by the constitution.

And our generation? Well, we will go down in the history books as smoke-blowers and women’s-pseudo-liberators if we continue like this, because you bring intellectual stagnation and social paralysis through gender-equality-totalitarianism. (Bundestag, 2018: 1386, 19/7)

In contrast to the previous speakers, Höchst presents gender equality as something already achieved in Germany. She recognizes the merits of the first and second waves of feminism (represented by the generation of grandmothers and mothers) that ‘truly enabled’ (wahrhaftig ermöglicht) equal rights of women and men. Describing the fight for equal rights as something successfully concluded in the past is instrumental in the argumentative turn that follows, allowing Höchst to question the record of ‘our generation’ and depicting it as detrimental to this achievement. Although she initially includes herself among the ‘we’, she sees the other parties (‘you’) as the proponents of a ‘gender-equality-totalitarianism’ (Gleichstellungstotalitarismus), as the real ‘smoke-blowers’ (Nebelkerzenwerfer) and ‘women’s-pseudo-liberators’ (Pseudofrauenbefreier). Much of the AfD’s vocabulary is tailored to an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy, evoking an imaginary heartland at the mercy of an all-powerful elite – on other occasions described by Höchst as an ‘opinion-maker-cartel’
What the intentions of ‘the elite’ are remains generally fairly vague, but one recurring AfD theme is the critique of a neoliberal commodification of women. In her speech, Höchst goes on to note several ‘misogynist achievements’ of the recent past revolving around the theme of women’s economic dependency. For example, she says, ‘You celebrate women in the labor market as an achievement. This is long past. Your politics coerce women into employment’. Pitting ‘coercion’ (Zwang) against choice fulfills an important function in the AfD’s narratives; it is the demarcation between equal rights (of opportunity) (Gleichberechtigung) and equal status (Gleichstellung) of women and men. On the one hand, the AfD claims the structural discrimination of women to be non-existent, like a ‘yeti’, as Höchst says, ‘that nobody has seriously seen’ (Bundestag, 2018: 1387, 19/17). Similarly, her colleague Thomas Ehrhorn describes the gender pay gap as an ‘absurd claim’ (Bundestag, 2018: 1772, 19/21). Unsurprisingly, the AfD opposes any affirmative action policies such as gender quotas. In the plenum, the AfD fraction regularly makes proud statements about not having a quota for political positions (as, for example, the Green Party), sporting a share of female delegates of about 10%. The main message is that women can be as successful as men in their work life – if they want to. Höchst (having four children) and also Alice Weidel (party whip and former high-level employee of Goldman Sachs) are instrumental in conveying this image. On the other hand, turning the argument on its head, the AfD purports that a woman’s choice to be a mother and housewife is not only discredited but also made economically impossible by government policy. By this juxtaposition, the AfD suggests that political measures allegedly fostering equal status are actually violating equal rights of women and men. Beatrix von Storch, a devoted Christian and one of the most visible female leading figures of the AfD, illustrates this in her speech, commenting on the budget of the Ministry for the Family, the Elderly, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) agreed on by the government:

In a remarkable reinterpretation of the budget policy text, the ‘rethinking’ of gender roles becomes a ‘re-education’ by ‘radical feminists’ and ‘gender-gaga ideologists’ (I will come back to these appellations later). The rhetorical proximity to ‘re-education camps’ (Umerziehungslager) seems unlikely to be a coincidence, fitting Storch’s narrative that traditional roles allegedly have to be ‘overcome’ (überwunden) – not rethought, but permanently left behind with no way back. She suggests that – in contrast to the AfD
the government (you) rejects the notion that ‘mothers are good for their children’. This is one example of the essentializing narratives employed by populists, appealing to the ‘common-sensical truth’ of an imaginary heartland. According to the epistemological principle to see is to know (Krämer and Klingler, 2020: 257), the AfD looks behind the ‘smoke-blowers’ to present a simple choice to ‘the people’: ‘freedom of choice’ (Wahlfreiheit) versus ‘re-education’; self-realization (Selbstverwirklichung) by being a mother and homemaker versus ‘public exploitation’ at the ‘cash desk of Aldi’. Another important feature of this narrative is the introduction of class as a new marker of difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Describing the gender quota as only beneficial for women in DAX company advisory boards, Storch accuses the government of making clientele politics, their ‘radical’ feminism failing to deal with the issues of ‘common’ women (who happen to work at the cash desk).

The considerable attention that is devoted by the AfD to families in general and mothers and children in particular is of course not an end in itself. In their speeches, AfD delegates put a strong emphasis on ‘activating family policies’ and a ‘welcoming culture for children’ to prevent a ‘demographic disaster’ for the German Volk (Bundestag, 2018: 2034, 19/23). In their programme for the national election in 2017, the AfD even proposes to rename the BMFSFJ into ‘Ministry for the Family and Population Development’ (Bundesministerium für Familie und Bevölkerungsentwicklung) (AfD, 2017: 37). Though much less radical, the AfD’s systematic pronatalist approach which implicitly targets only ‘German families’ bears clear resemblance to the population policy in Nazi Germany that encouraged the reproduction of the ‘German Volk’ while hampering or forcibly preventing the reproduction of others (Willenbacher, 2007).

The AfD’s focus on reproduction also explains the precedence given to the heteronormative family, the coinciding denigration of alternative models, and the general opposition to abortion, but it also plays an important role in the fierce opposition to ‘gender ideology’. However, their mobilization against the whole ‘academic concept’ of gender is driven by the firm belief that women and men are biologically, and therefore ‘categorically, intrinsically, obviously ontologically’, different (Hark and Villa, 2017: 90). Policies aiming to establish equal status of women and men are, therefore, understood as a state-imposed leveling down of these ‘natural’ differences. Gender studies research challenging assumptions of a binary as well as coextensive sex and gender tends to be discredited as being unscientific, and the researchers are seen as the stooges of the establishment. Höchst, in a Bundestag (2018) debate on the budget of the ministry of education and research, states,

Pseudo-scientific gender research has already given us the so-called third sex, which is as natural and scientifically verifiable as ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ by Hans Christian Andersen is a factual report. Remember: The political determination of absolute truth deprives science and research of its freedom. (p. 2055, 19/23)

Notable about this statement is Höchst’s suggestion that there is some kind of political conspiracy connected to gender, which enabled ‘pseudo-scientific gender studies’ to bring about the 2017 ruling of the constitutional court that instructed the government to introduce a third gender category ‘diverse’ in the register of births. Again, a dichotomy is evoked between ‘freedom’ of science and the ‘political determination of absolute truth’
Höchst’s reference to the Andersen fable also has a deeper meaning than the basic parallelism that situates the third gender in the realm of fiction. In the fable, two fraudsters pretend to make beautiful one-of-a-kind clothes for the Kaiser ‘invisible to anyone who was unfit for his office, or who was unusually stupid’ (Andersen, 2019). However, neither the Kaiser’s officials nor he himself can see the clothes, but nobody dares to admit it. In a great procession lead by the Kaiser, a small child is first to dare saying ‘but he hasn’t got anything on!’ before the whole town starts crying out. In this narrative, it is the ‘common-sense’ of the people that challenges the ostensible authority of experts (the fraudster weavers) and the uncritical acceptance by the establishment (the Kaiser and his officials), figuratively standing for gender studies and ‘the elite’.

Much of the AfD’s populist parlance is geared towards portraying themselves as protectors of a common-sensical truth from ‘gender-gaga ideologies’ and their instruments of ‘indoctrination’, ‘disenfranchisement’ (Entmündigung), and ‘nationalization’ (Verstaatlichung) (Storch, Bundestag, 2018: 4617, 19/44). Common target is the EU gender mainstreaming policy. Rather paradoxically, gender mainstreaming is not criticized for its goal to take the everyday realities of life of women and men into account in all policy decisions, but because the EU is claimed to have instilled ‘unnatural’ gender realities in the first place, and these are now to be strategically spread (see also Kováts, 2018). This argument is regularly used in German public discourse, for example, by the catholic journalists Birgit Kelle and Gabriele Kuby (Hark and Villa, 2017).

Overall, the AfD’s narrative around the issue of ‘gender ideology’ seeks to establish an imaginary heartland defined by equal rights for, but ‘natural’ differences between women and men. In this post-feminist take, it is argued that the everyday realities of heartland women are under attack by ‘radical feminists’ as part of a culturally deracinated and nebulous worldwide elite. However, the essentialist construction of such an elite casts both ‘radical feminists’ and ‘multiculturalists’ in opposition to the heartland. The AfD treats these groups as largely coextensive, and the figure of a multiculturalist and feminist elite is instrumental to their post-feminist common-sense narrative. Multiculturalist feminists, so the claim goes, are essentially a threat to women’s rights because they allow mass immigration of Muslims and strive for a pluralistic (non-assimilated) society. This line of argument is well illustrated by Höchst’s speech on the occasion of the World Women’s Day discussed earlier. After reproaching the government and the delegates of other opposition parties for endangering the achievements of first and second wave feminism with their ‘gender-equality-totalitarianism’, she continues,

But, ladies and gentlemen, it gets even worse. Our generation of left-green women’s rights activists from all parties, in the parliaments and on the streets, is hiring itself out as the generation of compliant stirrup holders and welcome clappers. They will go down in history as the women and women’s rights’ activists who deliver us up to a deeply totalitarian ideology, Islam, under the cloak of tolerance. They deliver us to gender segregation and the systematic discrimination of women, which is structurally inherent in this so-called religion. (Bundestag, 2018: 1387, 19/17)

The importance of the anti-Islam framing in the AfD’s post-feminist narrative becomes clear by acknowledging the implicit rank order Höchst draws by introducing it as ‘even
worse’ (noch schlimmer). The culprits here are ‘left-green (linksgrün) women’s rights’ activists of all parties,’ thereby asserting that the multiculturalism that is usually represented by the left and green parties has become a shared stance across the establishment. However, the label ‘linksgrün’ is often pejoratively used in German to imply a naïve political correctness. For the ‘compliant stirrup holders’ (willfährige Steigbügelhalter) and ‘welcome clappers’, Höchst suggests that their precept of tolerance ‘cloaks’ what is really going on. Thus, the outlined political failure is not attributed to deliberate action (such as the imposition of a ‘gender ideology’), but to a naïve inactivity of women’s rights’ activists as well as women in general (Frauen und Frauenrechtlerinnen). It is once again the evocation of a ‘common-sensical truth’: By portraying Islam as ‘totalitarian ideology’ rather than as religion, the purportedly inherent discrimination of women appears ‘systematic’, ‘structural’, and ultimately immutable.

Women’s rights have often been used as a vehicle to establish a notion of a ‘false’ or ‘misguided’ tolerance (falsche Toleranz) in the German public discourse. Particularly, the figure of the ‘Muslim woman’ has been employed to redefine a European subject whose liberalism is expressed in a stance of ‘zero tolerance’ versus the ‘intolerance’ of Islam (Yildiz, 2011). Much of the purported image is a reframing of the cultural imperialism of the West, now both White men and White women ‘saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak, 1988: 92). As in other European countries, public-veiling has been a main site of contestation in Germany in which many different actors posed as the liberators of Muslim women from their oppressive husbands by opposing burqa, hijab, and headscarf (Fournier and Yurdakul, 2010). Particularly, burqa and hijab seem instrumental to the AfD’s Bundestag speeches as markers of a fundamental cultural difference between the values of the heartland and the ‘values of Islam’. In February 2018, the AfD made a motion to ban full veiling in public. In the corresponding debate, Curio explains,

The AfD calls for a ban on full veiling in public places. It is about protecting the individual freedom rights of Muslim women against peer pressure and intimidation in parallel societies. It is about the preservation of the values of our society, which cannot tolerate the optical redaction (Unkenntlichmachung) of the person. This erasure of the face is the symbol of the suppression of female self-determination, it is gender-specific discrimination par excellence. (Bundestag, 2018: 1111, 19/14)

Particularly interesting here is the way ‘self-determination’ (Selbstbestimmung) is presented. Pitting ‘individual freedom rights’ (Individualfreiheitsrechte) against ‘peer pressure’ and ‘intimidation’ suggests that Muslim women would choose to stay unveiled without the ‘oppression’ by their husbands. However, by banning burqa and hijab, these women would be ‘coerced to freedom’ (Fournier and Yurdakul, 2010: 99) and, thus, be denied any self-determination in that regard – irrespective of the actual outcome of such a determination. Clearly, the AfD’s main concern is not the well-being of Muslim women. Not only would a ban only target a small minority in Germany, other relevant topics such as religious discrimination are never mentioned in their speeches. Instead, the figure of the veiled Muslim woman is only cast in opposition to the ‘values of our society’. Based on earlier rulings of the German constitutional court, it was known that banning full veiling would be irreconcilable with the constitutional right of religious freedom; what
makes this motion a classic example of what is called a *Schaufensterantrag* (window dressing motion). It was a strategic effort to conjure up a heartland of self-determined (and predominantly White) women under threat by Islam.

The AfD sustains this narrative of cultural irreconcilability also by instrumentalizing crimes where women have become victims of Muslim (immigrant) men, notably rapes and murders, suggesting a constant state of crisis. For example, 3 weeks after an Afghan refugee killed his German 15-year-old ex-girlfriend Mia in a drug store in Kandel, a small city in Rhineland-Palatinate, the AfD demanded a parliamentary *Aktuelle Stunde* (debate format for topics of ‘general interest’), entitled ‘*Freiheit und Gleichheit von Frauen stärken – Grundgesetz statt Parallelgesellschaft*’ (‘Strengthening freedom and equality of women – Constitution instead of parallel society’). Höchst states,

Dear colleagues, under the eyes of all of us and under your responsibility, the state is less able every day to guarantee elementary women’s rights and to protect women and girls from being sacrificed as an almost endless string of individual cases, indeed as collateral damage, on the altar of your failed multicultural ideology. We have achieved a lot as a society for women. Now all that is at stake. (Bundestag, 2018: 586, 19/7)

Her whole speech is geared towards presenting the crimes of Muslim immigrants (particularly refugees) as a fundamental and continuing issue, the inevitable ‘collateral damage’ (*Kollateralschäden*) of a religious-like (altar) ‘multiculturalist ideology’. By declaring even ‘elementary women’s rights’ to be compromised, Höchst suggests that women will not have *less*, but ultimately *no rights* if Muslim immigration continues.

Taken together, the AfD’s populist women’s rights narrative is built around two main frames: (1) the heartland versus ‘gender ideology’ and (2) the heartland versus Muslim immigration and multiculturalism. A defining feature is how these frames are cast in a mutual relatedness that offers yet another essentializing perspective on their post-feminist heartland: Measures following a claimed ‘gender ideology’ are not only rejected for shaping ‘unnatural’ gender relations in a heartland of women and men bestowed with perfectly equal rights. Any such measures must also appear greatly misguided when pitted against the urgency and severity of a so-called ‘cultural conquest’ (‘*Kulturelle Landnahme*’; Curio, Bundestag, 2018: 1112, 19/14) by Islam and its allegedly inherent oppression of women. The strategic use of this kind of relativization is a recurring feature of AfD speeches in the Bundestag; consider the example of Martin Reichardt:

Just take note that gender-neutral spelling and women’s quotas neither hinder nor stop Islamic-motivated violence against women in Germany. [. . .] As pseudo-feminists and equality ideologists, you do nothing at all against this threat. (Bundestag, 2018: 597, 19/7)

The AfD’s post-feminist heartland and the party’s self-concept as its only champion are carved out of the assertions that neither multiculturalists nor ‘equality ideologists’ are really concerned with women’s rights. Although AfD delegates never claim to be feminists in their speeches, their rhetoric clearly assumes some kind of ‘genuine’ post-feminism for themselves in demarcation to what they call ‘pseudo-feminism’ or ‘radical feminism’. For the AfD, it is about preserving the ‘good life’ of the heartland that
purportedly existed ‘before the corruptions and the distortions of the present’ (Taggart, 2004: 274). It is exactly this social imaginary that Höchst evokes in the closing statement of her speech about the World Women’s Day:

Ladies and gentlemen, today, in 2018, it is clear that genuine feminism is necessarily value-conservative. Indeed, it must be, for it seeks to preserve the achievements of freedom for women. It wants to preserve their rights, offer them protection and security. It wants to act preventively, by finally stopping glossing over and covering up. (Bundestag, 2018: 1387, 19/17)

In this essentializing narrative geared towards achieving hegemony in public discourse, ‘women are given a seemingly (retro-)revolutionary voice’ (Dietze, 2020: 160). The presented ‘common-sensical truth’ is that ‘all is at stake’ (Höchst), but not yet lost if the ‘genuine feminism’ of the AfD is going to prevail. In this perspective, it becomes clear why Höchst situates feminism no longer on the political left (as quoted in the introduction) but on the political right, of which the AfD claims the role as sole representative in Germany.

Challenges for feminism

In the Bundestag, the AfD strives to evoke the social and cultural imaginary of a German heartland that has to be protected from Muslim ‘outsiders’ as well as a ‘radical feminist elite’. In their narratives, gender serves as the ‘meta-language’, the ‘symbolic glue’ that homogenizes the heartland around a fundamental cultural anxiety (Dietze and Roth, 2020). In the struggle over (a Gramscian) hegemony, the AfD strategically and selectively co-opts liberal and feminist discourses, subverting their intent to re-politicize gender issues in a way that reshapes the people’s perceptions of themselves and of society. The ultimate goal is to establish a ‘post-feminist common sense’ that embodies the opposition to Muslim immigration and state-supported equality policy. As others have noted, the struggle over hegemony seems ‘far from being decided’ (Dietze and Roth, 2020: 16).

One of the main reasons why the national parliamentary stage is of particular significance in that regard is the enhanced opportunity structures available to the AfD to promote their post-feminist narrative. As party present in the Bundestag, the AfD receives additional public funding, their speaking time roughly corresponds to the size of their fraction (exceeding that of other opposition parties), and what they say receives more attention as debates are typically public and broadcasted. In many ways, it seems that RRP actors have ‘outpaced progressive movements in their expertise in on-line social mobilization’ (Cullen, 2020: 15) and are also successfully combining media campaigning and parliamentary work to enhance their agenda-setting power (Berg, 2018). Examples include the AfD’s motion to ban full veiling in public, the minute of silence that Thomas Seitz held against parliamentary rules of procedure after a German girl was killed by a Muslim refugee, and the Aktuelle Stunde after the events in Kandel – all of which were exploited by the AfD on their social media channels and met with considerable media attention. In Kandel, the AfD played a major role in the mobilization of a large demonstration under the slogan ‘Kandel ist überall’ in March 2018.

The strategic omnipresence of the AfD and other RRP actors moves their political positions center stage, over time normalizing their arguments and changing what is
sagbar (utterable) as part of a ‘new honesty’ (Reinemann, 2020). This process is further facilitated by them conjuring up a heartland that is geared towards extending and homogenizing their constituency, striving to be compatible to as many different actors as possible, be it religious fundamentalists, pro-life organizations, other political conservatives, and even some Islam-critic feminists. In the constant reshaping of inconsistencies that is necessary to maintain a homogeneous heartland, women’s rights are an instrumental vehicle to separate ‘insiders’ from ‘outsiders’. Time and again, and this essay is no exception, it has been shown that women’s rights issues are exploited by the AfD to fuel xenophobia and Islamophobia, something that became particularly apparent in the aftermath of the events of Cologne, when anti-racist feminist actors were struggling to counter gendered racializing (Garraio, 2020). However, what seems largely underexplored and much less discussed to date is how the ‘struggle with the “multiplicity of gender equality”’, as Anna Korteweg (2020) put it, does not end with discussions about women’s rights and Islam, but generally extends to how feminist conceptualizations of gendered realities of life might be perceived as different from the practical realities of ‘common’ women and men. Much of the AfD’s crusade against ‘gender ideology’ rests on purporting that ‘the good life’ of the heartland is exactly the life that people have actually been living, without all the recently introduced or proposed emancipation policies. Such a story allows ‘for people to feel good about the ways in which they have been behaving rather than suggesting that their behaviors have been wrong or exclusionary and should be changed accordingly’ (Spierings, 2020: 50). This retrotopia (Bauman, 2017) is also an instrumental counter-figure to the ‘individualized modes of emancipation promoted by well-off (neo-)liberal feminists’ (Rottenberg, as cited in Dietze, 2020: 160). By developing the failed self-realization of many women as a significant topic, the AfD makes gender equality policy appear as being clientelistic and largely misguided, connecting it to the broader issues of class and socio-economic inequality. In general, this narrative represents a re-politicization of women’s issues that are cast in an alleged opposition to detached feminist claims institutionalized in a seemingly technocratic national and EU policy (Kováts, 2018).

My point here is that this narrative presents as much a challenge to feminism as the narrative of women’s rights under attack by Islam, as both are interrelated main pillars of the AfD’s strategy to conjure up a crisis of representational politics. The AfD is offering social recognition to women who might have felt not recognized before (certainly in many cases rightfully so), only to bind this representation to an exclusion of others (namely Muslims). As Riem Spielhaus (2019) notes, offering a convincing critique of such an ‘instrumentalization of feminist arguments [. . .] is necessarily connected to self-critical reflection but also requires the refusal of such offers’ (p. 54). To be sure, the AfD’s narratives are challenged by other parties – in the Bundestag and elsewhere – as well as in the wider public discourse, in which many feminist voices acknowledge the intersectionality of discrimination (such as #ausnahmslos, Reyhan Şahin, Lamya Kaddor, Sabine Hark, and Paula-Irene Villa, just to name a few). However, I would argue that social class, as an essential part of the practical realities of women, should feature more prominently in the debate again and become part of the self-critical reflection of feminist representation, addressing the ‘demand-side causes’ of RRP. Reclaiming some of the lost territory requires a concerted effort of actors to provide a powerful counter-imaginary to
the ‘post-feminist common sense’ embodied in the populist heartland. In a way, the re-politicization of gender issues by the AfD offers a chance to prove that intersectionally aware feminism benefits everybody.

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Notes
1. This is not to say that Islamophobia became a political stance of social democrats. Sarrazin was severely criticized by his own party and ultimately excluded in 2020.
2. The transcripts and videos of all plenum sessions are available at: https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/protokolle/plenarprotokolle
3. I define the following set of keywords/stubs: abtreib, christentum, christlich, ehe, einwander, emanz, familie, feminis, flucht, frau, gender, geschlecht, gleichstellung, ideologie, immigration, islam, krimin, kopftuch, kultur, mann, migrant, muslim, religion, säkul, sex, schleier, tradition, werte, zivilisation. Each search result returns a snippet of roughly 100 characters of surrounding text. If the snippet or, if ambiguous, the larger context belongs to the discourse, I extract the complete speech. I also extract speeches of other parliamentarians if they provide additional information about the specific debate.

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