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Antifeminism as an intersectional ideology: reflections on the usefulness of intersectional analyses in the context of the racist instrumentalization of women's rights

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Using the example of German feminist debates, this paper examines the applicability of intersectional approaches to analyzing the relationship between antifeminism, racism, and sexism, as well as the far-right co-optation of critiques of sexism, using the debates surrounding the evaluation of the sexualized assaults on New Year's Eve in Cologne 2015/16 as a starting point. First, different positions in the German feminist discourse are outlined, and through a summary of key criticisms of intersectionality theories, the necessity of an identity- and society-critical understanding of intersectionality is developed. After briefly discussing the role of antifeminism within far-right ideology, the paper explores the conceptualization of antifeminism as an intersectional ideology, highlighting its entanglements with other ideologies of inequality and their mutual reinforcement. Drawing on Karin Stögner's concept of an intersectionality of ideologies, it is argued that an intersectional perspective offers valuable insights for analyzing both antifeminism and far-right instrumentalizations of sexualized violence. The paper concludes with reflections on how these considerations can be linked to political education and potential applications of the findings.

KEYWORDS

intersectionality, far right, racism, antifeminism, sexism, right-wing extremism, intersectional feminism

Intersectional perspectives: opportunity or obstacle?

On New Year's Eve 2015/16, Cologne (Germany) witnessed mass sexual assaults, thefts, and other crimes, primarily around the main train station and Cologne Cathedral. The perpetrators were predominantly described as men of North African or Arab origin, sparking a controversial debate on migration, crime, and the response of authorities (Dietze, 2016). These events led to intense societal and political discussions about security, integration policies, and approaches to addressing sexualized violence. Within right-wing extremist rhetoric the threat to women's rights and sexualized violence was selectively projected onto Muslim men as supposedly particularly sexually violent. Meanwhile, feminist perspectives that highlighted the structural underpinnings of sexualized violence were systematically marginalized or discredited as "culturally relativistic." Thus, the reference to women's rights did not serve actual gender justice, but the racializing construction of a "dangerous other," in which sexism was intertwined with racism - a classic case of anti-feminist instrumentalization,

in which equality rhetoric is used to stigmatize migrant masculinity and to stage white majority women as worthy of protection.

Since then, right-wing extremist groups and parties in particular have increasingly used the debate to spread racist agendas by presenting themselves as supposed defenders of women's rights (Ajanovic et al., 2016; Drücke and Klaus, 2019; Goetz, 2021; Jäger et al., 2019; Liebke, 2020). The racist instrumentalization of the assaults by these actors once again underscored the controversies surrounding intersectional perspectives within feminist debates, policies, and related research. In this context, Hark and Villa emphasize that "Cologne" represents both "the ambivalent entanglements of racism, sexism, and feminism in the present" and "the necessity of critically, including self-critically, engaging with these terms, their inherent differences, and interconnections" (Hark and Villa, 2017, p. 10). While the projection of sexualized violence or patriarchal structures onto racialized "foreign" men by the far right is not a new phenomenon (see, e.g., AK Fe.In, 2019), feminist debates in Germany surrounding the events of Cologne also faced difficulties in classifying and assessing the assaults and in exploring the relationships between sexism and racism.

For instance, the collective Feministische Intervention (Feminist Intervention) (AK Fe.In, 2019, p. 134) reflected that "just as these topics were overexploited by the far right, they were neglected by many leftist groups, or the discussion was reduced to exposing far-right rhetoric as racist." This oversimplified and one-dimensional approach often overlooked central questions, leaving them unanswered. At the same time, debates on "legitimate" criticism of Islam or the instrumentalization of "women's issues" by the far right led to both discussions and dilemmas: "Racism and sexism were either played off against each other, trivializing or exaggerating sexualized violence" (ibid.).

While some actors within feminist discourse in Germany advocated for a stronger integration of intersectional approaches, others questioned the usefulness of such theories in this debate. For example, Dietze (2015, p. 125) argued even before the Cologne attacks that "anti-genderism, sexual self-determination, and the fight against misogyny" in the far right "can only be fully understood through an intersectional perspective." Similarly, Brigitte Geiger (2017), in her text "After Cologne: A Look at Developments and Contexts of Feminist Debates on Violence," stressed that "against such polarizing divisions in gender and violence discourse that privilege certain forms of violence, perpetrators, and victim constellations while ignoring others, a differentiated discussion of gender inequalities and violence is required." Such a discussion should, on the one hand, be grounded in a concept of violence that includes deconstructive and queer approaches, while on the other hand, it must account for "the diverse constellations of violence and the intersectional interrelations of power and violence structures, as well as discursive violence" (ibid.).

In contrast, Schuster (2017) emphasized that anti-racist feminism is not necessarily synonymous with intersectionality. She argued that intersectional approaches were "not easily reconcilable with the feminist critique of the discourse surrounding 'Cologne,' which revolved around two problem levels: the stereotyping of refugees on the one hand and sexualized violence against women on the other" (Schuster, 2017, p. 283). The conflation of these two levels, she warned, risked making arguments "unclear and contradictory" (ibid., p. 284), while "the persistent reliance on intersectionality theory" in the debate on Cologne "led more to contradictions than to solutions."

Perinelli (2016), in turn, criticized the "counterculturalization of anti-racism" in the context of the Cologne attacks, arguing that "many anti-racist groups emphasized that refugees were themselves victims of such violence and could in no way be perpetrators." He attributed this stance to "the currently popular but reductive theorem of intersectionality in anti-racism and feminism," which, he argued, "operates with the idea of an intersection of racism and sexism (and other social exclusion mechanisms) in the sense of an additive or mutually reinforcing relationship of oppression." Referring to Judith Butler—who has historically shown less interest in intersectionality theories than in the mutual conditioning of racism and sexism—Perinelli pointed out that racism is "less an independent axis" but rather a prerequisite for articulating gender orders. Conversely, he argued, "diffuse, non-definable gender roles serve as a resonance space for racist notions" (ibid.).

Origins, critiques and understandings of intersectionality

Intersectional ideas originated primarily in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. One significant contribution came from the Combahee River Collective (1977), a group of Black lesbian feminists who published the "Combahee River Collective Statement" in 1977. In this statement, they drew attention to the multidimensionality of oppression, arguing that Black (lesbian) women experience multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously—such as sexism, racism, classism, and discrimination based on sexuality. Their intervention explicitly challenged the dominant narratives of white feminist movements at the time, which largely ignored these intersecting forms of oppression. Moreover, the statement introduced the concept of identity politics as a strategic concept, emphasizing that political struggle must be rooted in the specific experiences of those affected by oppression. As they put it: "This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression."¹

The term intersectionality itself was coined in the late 1980s by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. Drawing from her analysis of court cases in the U.S.—where legal frameworks could only acknowledge one axis of discrimination at a time, either racism or sexism—Crenshaw developed the theoretical concept further to account for multiple, overlapping forms of marginalization. In key texts such as "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (Crenshaw, 1989) and "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (Crenshaw, 1991), she articulated a critique of legal and political ignorance to intersectional harm. She also introduced the metaphor of a traffic intersection to illustrate how different forms of discrimination intersect and compound each other, describing

1 https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition_Readings.pdf

intersectionality as an analytical “lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.”² Building on these earlier contributions and debates, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins further advanced the analysis of structural power relations in her influential book “Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment” (Hill Collins, 2000). Her work explores how epistemic systems, social power, and oppositional knowledge are interlinked, particularly from the standpoint of Black women. Collins introduced the concept of a “matrix of domination”, showing how various forms of disadvantage are structurally interconnected. In her framework, both knowledge and lived experience of Black women function as subversive sources of insight and serve as foundations for collective action and political agency.

The reception of intersectionality theories in German-speaking contexts began relatively late. While ideas like triple oppression and multiple discrimination, inspired by the U.S. Black feminist movement, had been discussed in feminist activism and academic circles, a more sustained academic engagement with intersectionality only began in the 2000s. This took place especially within feminist and gender studies, and was closely tied to the growing influence of postcolonial studies and critical race theory in the German-speaking academic landscape.

While general definitions still tend to conceptualize intersectionality as “a scholarly and feminist concept” that describes “how different forms of discrimination interact, overlap, and depend on each other,” (Genderdings, n.d.) critiques, controversies, and debates within intersectionality research have led to a differentiation of approaches, priorities, and points of contention.³ From the outset, the “boom” (Knapp, 2011, p. 250) of intersectionality theories in gender studies was met with differing evaluations among feminist scholars. Lenz (2010), for example, questioned whether the reception of intersectionality theories in German-speaking contexts represented a “new paradigm.” While many scholars viewed the theory’s openness and flexibility as advantageous due to its adaptability and broad applicability, others criticized it as a ‘trend phenomenon’ due to its conceptual vagueness (cf. Zander, 2018, p. 47). Knapp, for instance, described intersectionality as a “neologism without a specific content” (Knapp, 2017, p. 251). Additionally, several shortcomings were identified, including the reluctance of many proponents to adequately consider antisemitism (cf. Stögner, 2017), the additive interpretation of overlapping categories of difference (cf. Walgenbach, 2012; Kerner, 2010), the strong identity-political focus that risks reinforcing the very categories that underlie discrimination (the ‘reification dilemma,’ cf.

Budde, 2013, p. 39; IMST Gender_Diversitäten Netzwerk, n.d.; Lorey, 2011; Stögner, 2017), the lack of a structural critique of society, and the failure to explain the root causes of discrimination (cf. Zander, 2018).

Zander (2018, p. 48) emphasized that “the great achievement of intersectionality research” has been “to systematically direct political and scholarly attention to multiple discrimination and to investigate it.” He thus understands intersectionality as “a call to engage with various forms of discrimination, to dismiss none as secondary, and to avoid barricading oneself within an identity-political group.” However, he also criticizes the fact that this focus on discrimination has not only brought benefits but, in many cases, led to the loss of a broader social critique: “In the mainstream of intersectionality research, the characteristics of the society being criticized remain largely unexplained” (ibid., p. 53). By failing to connect analyses to broader social structures, intersectionality often focuses on the consequences of discrimination rather than its root causes. This has implications for political education and prevention work: While it creates space to address different forms of discrimination, it often remains at the level of symptom treatment. In this sense, one could argue: If the foundations of discrimination cannot be explained, it will be difficult to effectively counteract them.

The pitfalls of identity-political interpretations of intersectionality are also highlighted by Lorey (2011, p. 36), who argues that “starting affirmatively from identities and treating them as stable foundations, as if identities were not contingent constructions,” prevents a critical examination of “the multiple social demands for unambiguity.” The idea of homogenized affiliations and the accompanying pressure to constantly categorize oneself leaves little room for individuality, diversity, and difference. This not only creates new exclusions—affecting those who do not or cannot fit into predefined categories—but also prevents a fundamental questioning of the very structures that produce exclusion. It would therefore be more important to focus not on the recognition of homogenized and thus stereotyped notions of minorities, but rather, as Rodríguez (2011, p. 78) suggests, on the “violent effects experienced by subjects who, within the still-existing colonial logic of difference, are constructed as ‘ethnicized, racialized, sexualized, and gendered inferior others’ through various mechanisms of governance, administration, and scholarly classification.

In a similar vein, Budde (2013, p. 36) criticizes the unclear conceptualization of power in many intersectionality approaches, arguing that “inequalities should not simply be added up, as this produces ‘new binaries.’” Instead, it is more important “to analyze their interplay and thus the specific power constellation in each case” (ibid.). He further emphasizes that “the relationships between categories can be highly variable, as can the relationships within categories.” This makes it all the more necessary to recognize the relational structure of the social sphere, with its “flexible and hybrid constellations” (ibid., p. 37), as subjects only become subjects through their relation to others. Ultimately, this approach could also “minimize the risk of reification” (ibid.). In her book “Differences an Power. On the intersectionality of racism, sexism and class” (Kerner, 2009), also Ina Kerner emphasizes that intersectionality is more than the addition of differences, but rather the analysis of power relations, social positioning and categorical entanglements. Consequently, intersectionality in her understanding does not simply mean “several discriminations at the same time,” but the analysis of their interconnectedness and interaction - on a structural level.

2 Steinmetz, Katy (February 20, 2020). She Coined the Term “Intersectionality” Over 30 Years Ago. Here’s What It Means to Her Today. Time. <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>.

3 Winker and Degele (2009, 37f) suggest—drawing on Klinger and Knapp (2008)—that, when examining intersectionality, one should distinguish between the overall societal structure, symbolic representations, and identity constructions. Lenz (2010, 160), on the other hand, refers to debates on four levels, which she identifies as “the foundations of identity formation, social-structural inequality, political discourses, mechanisms and practices, as well as the cultural representation of inequalities and differences.”

A social-critical perspective thus focuses on “determining the social conditions in which the position of ‘exteriority’ to the hegemonic inside is constructed” (Rodríguez, 2011, p. 78), thereby challenging identity-political approaches. “Social critique,” according to Gutiérrez Rodríguez (ibid., pp. 99), “is not interested in an identity-based reproduction of society. Rather, it highlights the limits of an identity-based reflection of society.”

The key commonality among social-critical applications of intersectionality, then, is their shift away from focusing on identity-based attributions, categories, or affiliations. Instead, they direct attention to the relations and structures that produce these categories in the first place. This allows for an analysis that centers on power relations and the resulting structures of inequality—such as those identified by Cornelia Klinger in “the structural categories of capitalism, patriarchy, and nationalism (with facets of ethnocentrism and colonialism/imperialism)” (Lenz, 2010, p. 161). These axes of inequality do not exist in isolation but are deeply interconnected and mutually constitutive.

Challenging the frequently used metaphor of a crossroads to explain intersectionality, Walgenbach critiques its tendency to depict categories as isolated from each other. Together with colleagues, she proposes the concept of ‘interdependencies’ as an alternative, “as it emphasizes the mutual dependence of social categories and thus foregrounds the complex relationships of power structures” (Walgenbach, 2012, p. 12). This approach makes it possible to highlight both the interdependence of different categories and the diversity of positions within them.

The usefulness of intersectional theories for a feminist analysis of the events in Cologne, as well as for examining far-right appropriations of women’s rights, therefore largely depends on the specific understanding of intersectionality itself.

Right-wing antifeminism

In recent years, a number of publications have addressed the increasing significance of gender in right-wing extremism and thus focused on gender construction, gender policies, but also gender- and sexuality-related ideologies of inequality such as sexism, misogyny, queerhostility, but also antifeminism (see i.e., Dietze and Roth 2020; Goetz and Mayer, 2023; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Hark and Villa, 2015; Henninger and Birs, 2020; Kovács and Pöim, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Mayer and Saur, 2017; Näser-Lather et al., 2019; Strube et al., 2021). Antifeminism can be described as opposition to (queer) feminist goals and achievements as well as to women’s movements. Instead, its adherents seek to uphold heteronormative patriarchal structures of dominance and power or to reverse changes affecting gender relations that have been brought about by societal transformation and modernization. Antifeminists also advocate for “autonomous societal models, which may, in turn, be linked to demographic and economic policy objectives” (Fritzsche, 2021, p. 261). Antifeminism today plays a central role in the ideology of the far right, primarily because the widespread acceptance of naturalizing gender conceptions in mainstream society enables right-wing actors to step out of the extreme-right corner and present themselves as part of the mainstream. This is particularly effective since these naturalized ideas of binary gender and heteronormativity largely align with common societal beliefs.

By insisting on this supposedly natural concept of gender roles and relationships, the far right also offers clear points of identification and orientation through normative frameworks, which can potentially relieve individuals of gender-specific expectations. Fritzsche (2021, p. 261) notes that antifeminism serves an “orienting function for individuals,” providing a stable, purportedly biologically and religiously justified behavioral schema in times of gender-political liberalization, which helps to counteract insecurity regarding individual sexual identities (ibid., p. 262). Furthermore, the enemy image of “feminists” serves as a scapegoat for “actual or perceived social or economic status losses” (ibid.). By invoking “nature,” right-wing extremists can use antifeminist arguments not only to propagate gender-based ideologies of inequality but also to disseminate racist patterns of thought through antifeminism. While openly legitimizing racist structures through references to “nature” has become widely unacceptable, no such taboo exists regarding gender and sexuality—on the contrary, the supposed “natural” complementarity of genders is deeply rooted in “common sense.”

“As open calls for a ‘racially pure people’ and the like are not (yet) acceptable in political discourse, the seemingly apolitical reference to ‘nature’ is highly popular. Gender/sex and sexuality are therefore topics that allow racist population politics to be reintroduced into the political sphere without explicitly naming them as such.” (Mayer and Goetz, 2022, 127)

For example, in far-right discourse, the necessity of women’s subordination, the preservation of male privileges, or the rejection of non-heteronormative forms of love and desire are reinterpreted in demographic terms and given a racist spin. Feminism is accused of leading to declining birth rates and increased immigration, which, in turn, threatens the survival of the “autochthonous population.” By contrast, “natural” families with higher birth rates are seen as ensuring the continuation of the “people.” As a result, an additional advantage of the far right’s promotion of antifeminist thought is its ability to disseminate core right-wing extremist convictions, such as anti-migration agendas and racist population policies.

This connection was evident in the far-right instrumentalization of the Cologne New Year’s Eve events, where right-wing extremists sought, on the one hand, to portray themselves as enlightened defenders of Western superiority and modern values such as women’s rights, in contrast to allegedly backward migrant men. On the other hand, they externalized the threat of sexualized violence exclusively onto these “foreign-marked” men. This strategy can also be considered antifeminist, as it provides right-wing extremists with a means of discrediting feminism while simultaneously claiming to support women’s rights.

“A widespread strategy is to draw a distinction between feminism and advocacy for women’s rights [...]. While the former is accused of embracing all the supposed nonsense of gender theories (‘language control,’ ‘man-hating,’ ‘abolition of gender,’ ‘political sex change,’ etc.), the latter is framed as addressing real needs and legitimate concerns of women.” (AK Fe.In, 2019, p. 176)

Thus, it becomes clear that the far right’s engagement with women’s rights is not about supporting emancipatory feminist

demands and achievements or critiquing the patriarchal foundations of society and the resulting structures of disadvantage.

“On the contrary, biologically constructed differences between (exclusively two possible) genders are affirmed, thereby naturalizing patriarchal gender relations. As the only focus is on the equality of ‘our women’ with ‘our men’ (rather than the equality of all women or genders worldwide), equality agendas are also nationalized. Meanwhile, issues such as protection from violence and sexism are ethnicized, externalized, and solely problematized in relation to those marked as ‘foreign.’” (ibid., p. 178)

Lastly, antifeminism also serves as a unifying framework for different political spectrums that have found common ground in the rejection of feminist achievements. This tendency is reinforced by the ongoing ambiguity of the term gender, which allows its opponents an “associative-container approach” and the activation of “a multitude of prevailing social prejudices [...] that mutually reinforce each other” (Strube, 2021, p. 58). Rebekka Blum also emphasizes that antifeminism is not only “closely linked to other ideologies of inequality such as racism, homo- and transphobia, and antisemitism,” but also gains strength “during times when these ideologies of inequality are experiencing an upswing,” such as during “periods of social and economic change and uncertainty” (Blum, 2019, p. 115).

It thus becomes evident that antifeminism is an ideology that is intersectionally intertwined with other ideologies of inequality, thereby enabling the articulation of further demeaning thought patterns.

Initial intersectional perspectives on antifeminism

In feminist (scholarly) debates, distinct terminologies have been discussed to address the phenomenon of pitting sexism and racism against one another or instrumentalizing critiques of sexism in a racist manner. For instance, Farris (2011) introduced the term “femonationalism” into the discourse to describe the heterogeneous and intersectional instrumentalization of women’s rights and feminist interests by both far-right and feminist actors. Similarly, Sager and Mulinari (2018, p. 151) refer to “care racism” in connection with far-right antifeminist conceptions of the family, wherein it is envisioned that women provide care while men protect against the “foreign.” Stefanie Mayer, Edma Ajanovic, and Birgit Sauer, on the other hand, focus less on explaining the relationship between racism and sexism through intersectionality theories, and more on the strategic appropriation of intersectionality by right-wing actors, referring to this phenomenon as “intersectionality from above,” i.e., the instrumental use of different categories of inequality.” (Mayer et al., 2014, p. 251) In contrast to an emancipatory perspective, the emphasis here lies on the strategic production of meaning and the consolidation of power within political discourse. A few years later Roth and Sauer propose the concept of “context-specific strategies of exclusionary intersectionality,” (Roth and Sauer, 2022, p. 100) referring to the deliberate linkage of gender with other axes of domination—such as sexuality, religion, nationality, and class—with the aim of stigmatizing, excluding, or criminalizing certain groups. These strategies are

employed, for instance, by right-wing, Christian fundamentalist, or populist actors to effectively inscribe their ideologies into dominant discourses. According to the authors, right-wing movements strategically mobilize intersectionality to construct antagonistic narratives, for example by portraying Muslims, LGBTQI individuals, and migrants as ‘dangerous others.’ In doing so, they delineate a constructed ‘us’—typically framed as a white, Christian, heterosexual majority—against a ‘them.’ In this context, intersectionality is not employed in an emancipatory sense, but rather as an exclusionary mechanism. While antifeminism forms an explicit frame of reference in the article by Sauer and Roth, which is systematically analysed with the concept of “anti-gender mobilization,” the text by Mayer et al. addresses similar dynamics such as the instrumentalization of gender equality in the context of right-wing discourses, but without explicitly naming antifeminism as a theoretical or analytical frame of reference.

Initial explicit considerations on the relationship between antifeminism and intersectionality were formulated, for example, by Gabriele Dietze in her text “Reading Anti-Genderism⁴ Intersectionally” (2015). She points to contemporary references to gender-political issues within the (extreme) right that, on the one hand, reject feminist concerns while on the other hand positively invoke certain women’s rights when these can be racialized. Dietze characterizes this strategy—of externalizing debates on gender equality and locating problems solely in the “foreign other”—as a form of “Western sexual exceptionalism” (Dietze, 2015, p. 126). At the same time, she criticizes that in the “clamor of battle” it is frequently overlooked that polemicists arguing against “genderism” often have virtually no objections to certain forms of women’s emancipation; one might even say quite the opposite (ibid.). Although the terms “virtually nothing” and “the opposite” may seem as far-fetched as the notion that a “rhetoric of emancipation might indeed flourish” on the flip side of these discourses (ibid., p. 127)—especially since the positive references usually serve the purpose of discrediting immigrants or “Islam”—Dietze is correct in contending that the critique should not be confined solely to the antifeminist backlash. She therefore proposes to understand the phenomenon rather as a “formula for unification or a metaphor for community-building” (ibid.). In this way, the efficacy of antifeminist discourses across diverse spectra, serving as a common thread uniting various actors, can be explained. Their binding interest lies in the preservation of traditional gender dichotomies and the resulting gender roles, privileges, and power positions. “Structurally speaking,” Dietze (ibid.) argues, it is “a surrogate formation that overlays seemingly outdated discourses of sexual disciplining of revolt and otherness with a cosmology of binary gender.” “Within this discourse” it would be possible to advocate for “sexual self-realization,”

⁴ Dietze employs the term “anti-genderism” to describe current policies and movements that oppose gender studies, gender theories, and political practices advocating for sexual and gender diversity. However, as criticism of the term has increasingly emerged in recent years, this paper prefers the term “antifeminism.” In the related debates, it is noted that the term “genderism” originally comes from the sociologist Erving Goffman, who used it to denote the exact opposite—namely, the compulsion that all people should possess a specific social gender. Since it was subsequently reinterpreted and redefined by its opponents, it has become antifeminist vocabulary, the propagation of which should not be further encouraged through continued use (cf. Scheele, 2016; Mayer and Goetz, 2022).

although this does not reflect a love for sexual emancipation, but rather its potential as a deterrent to immigration (ibid.).

In summary, Dietze maintains her demand that “sexual exceptionalism, culturalist anti-migration racism, and anti-genderism should be read intersectionally” (ibid.), while leaving open the task of explicating what an intersectional perspective in this context might look like. Indications of such a perspective can be found in the work of Karin Stögner, whose approach is driven both by a critique of identity-political approaches to intersectionality and by a call for a new approach to intersectionality-theoretical methods.

Intersectionality of ideologies

Drawing on critical antisemitism research and the lacuna—or controversies—regarding the inclusion of antisemitism in intersectionality theory, Karin Stögner proposes “a radical revaluation of the concept of intersectionality in order to reclaim it for emancipatory politics.” (*Queers and Feminists Against Antisemitism*, 2018) In doing so, she outlines the concept of an “intersectionality of ideologies,” emphasizing “that different ideologies permeate and reinforce each other in discourse and practice, and thus continuously reproduce and reactivate as processual social phenomena over social and historical change” (Stögner, 2017, p. 25).

By not taking affectedness as the starting point, but rather understanding the intersections of disadvantages as overlaps of ideologies that condition and build upon one another, Stögner employs the term “intersectionality” in a manner distinct from that of most previous intersectionality theorists. By shifting the focus to “the structural level of ideological formation,” new perspectives for intersectionality research emerge—perspectives that are also capable of incorporating antisemitism. “While traditional approaches to intersectionality often exclude antisemitism, an intersectionality of ideologies conceives of antisemitism as the quintessential intersectional ideology by revealing that the potency of antisemitism as a convoluted explanation of the world also derives from its permeation by other ideologies such as sexism, racism, and nationalism” (ibid.). For this, it is necessary not to focus on the level of identity formation and “thus not to concentrate on those affected by multifaceted oppression and exclusion and their identity construction, but rather on the structural macro level.” Accordingly, Stögner proposes to “consistently relate the analytical concept of intersectionality to the structural level” in order to render it “fruitful for a critique of ideologies that does not regard ideologies as phenomena isolated from one another, but precisely in their intersections” (ibid., p. 27). This perspective focuses on ideologies in their function to legitimize inequality—that is, to determine ideologies as expressions of particular power constellations and as instruments for maintaining them—and, at the individual level, to account for “the authoritarian personality that readily follows predetermined ideologies” (ibid.) in analysis.

Antifeminism as an intersectional ideology

Just as Karin Stöger has illustrated with regard to antisemitism that it is an “intersectional ideology par excellence,” the reflections in this paper have shown that antifeminism is “an ideology that is consistently

permeated by sexist, racist, and nationalist elements, and derives its enduring societal and individual efficacy precisely from this intertwining” (Stögner, 2017, p. 26). In view of the intertwined convergence of racism and sexism within antifeminism, several dimensions for an intersectional analysis can be identified. On one hand, (1) elements of other ideologies of inequality are inscribed within antifeminism, and (2) antifeminism functions as an enabler for the articulation of other ideologies of inequality. However, certain manifestations of far-right antifeminism demonstrate that, for example, racism and sexism are not only interlinked but (3) are sometimes even pitted against each other—as was the case on New Year’s Eve in Cologne 2015/16. In precisely such cases, the intersectional analytical perspective becomes relevant once again.

At the core of this perspective is not an additive interpretation of multiple oppressions, nor the analogy—for instance, between racism and sexism—since, despite their structural similarities, such phenomena cannot be fully explained by simple addition. Rather, as exemplified by the Cologne case, it becomes evident that “racism should be understood as gendered and sexism as racialized” and that distinctions must be drawn between different “variants of racism and sexism,” or it must be assumed that racism and sexism can intertwine and manifest in varying ways depending on the context (Kerner, 2009, p. 38). Stögner (2017, p. 41) further emphasizes that “these ideologies intersect, with moments of one permeating and co-constituting the other. For an intersectional analysis of ideologies, this means that their respective ideological and terminological proximity is not accidental but, on the contrary, constitutive of their own content.”

With regard to the discourses following New Year’s Eve in Cologne, the “racialization” of sexism becomes apparent, for example, in the externalization of the threat of sexualized violence onto men marked as “foreign,” while the same threat is omitted when it comes to those within the dominant society. The gendered racist notions are made explicit by the invoked image of the “instinct-driven, Muslim man,” which is based on “centuries-old, (colonial) racist images” that, due to their deep anchoring in cultural memory, are readily recalled and offer points of connection to pre-existing images (AK Fe.In, 2019, p. 132). Moreover, these notions are accompanied by “the simultaneous idealization of its contrast image, namely that of the Western, enlightened society along with its men” (ibid.). Consequently, within far-right discourse, these men are envisioned as protectors of autochthonous women and of the entire “people,” who are tasked with defending them against the imagined threat posed by men marked as “foreign,” and with safeguarding the “people” from its downfall. Even the images of masculinity and femininity invoked in this context reflect deeply antifeminist patterns of thought that construct men as active and combative, in contrast to women, who are portrayed as passive and defenseless.

Thus, it is precisely through the intersectional lens (Crenshaw) that the far right’s purported critique of sexism can be exposed as inherently racist, thereby unveiling the antifeminist thought patterns embedded within it. Furthermore, it becomes evident that antifeminism as an ideology primarily exerts its influence through the ideologies intertwined with it.

Antifeminism as an intersectional ideology in political education

Antifeminism impacts people in various ways, and as a result, antifeminist attacks are currently directed predominantly against

individuals who do not conform to normative societal expectations. In particular, when those affected do not align with hegemonic, normative gender models on multiple levels, the intensity of the attacks can be amplified—for instance, against women with a migration background, those who are not ciswomen, or those whose desires do not follow the heterosexual matrix. Thus, it would be overly simplistic to claim that antifeminism targets all affected individuals in the same way. Contrary to the notion that the intersections of various devaluing ideologies simply add up, it appears necessary, even in political education contexts, to understand these as distinct experiences of discrimination emerging from their intertwinements, and to consider them in sensitization efforts while reflecting on the associated power relations. As Walgenbach underscores, “[a]dditive perspectives” should be overcome, since it is “not solely a matter of considering multiple social categories, but also of analyzing their interactions” (Walgenbach, 2012, p. 81). Instead of an approach based on identity politics, a critique of identity is adopted, one that examines both the societal frameworks of dominance and power relations in general and the specific educational context, along with the associated value systems and constructions of inequality.

For pedagogical and, in particular, political educational work, the integration of an intersectional perspective (while taking the outlined limitations into account) offers enrichment on two levels: on one hand, it can be employed as an analytical tool to determine the interplay of various ideologies of inequality; on the other, it also provides a strategy for addressing forms of disadvantage. Both levels aim at transformation and the development of pedagogical agency by providing impulses for how inequalities can be thematized and subsequently addressed, as well as how pedagogical practice can be designed in a less discriminatory manner. In this respect, it is particularly important not to understand identities as fixed by ascriptions or determined by ‘nature,’ but rather as changeable. In a guideline on “Intersectional Pedagogy – an Intersectional Educational Attitude,” the IMST Gender_Diversities Network succinctly summarizes the requirements: “The intersectional pedagogical approach or intersectional educational attitude calls for (self-) reflection, criticism of the societal norm system, and a willingness to change socially and structurally embedded mechanisms of inequality. Here, prevailing restrictive and exclusionary patterns of thought and ordering, as well as practices of inclusion and exclusion, should be critically examined and analyzed. Furthermore, one’s own social positioning, the associated privileges, and societally shaped structures of dominance and subordination, as well as power relations, should be scrutinized.” (IMST Gender_Diversitäten Netzwerk, n.d., p. 7) Such an approach thus aims both at improving the situation of affected individuals and at transforming society as a whole.

It is undeniable that the implementation of these objectives within the education system repeatedly encounters structural limitations, as the system mirrors societal normality along with the embedded disadvantages and ideologies of inequality. This includes, for example, an orientation towards a ‘normal student’ instead of taking the diverse life realities of learners as the starting point. Additionally, there are often narrow views regarding the complexity of identities, insufficient knowledge of ideologies of inequality, and a lack of efforts by educators to counterbalance social inequalities. In contrast, an intersectional pedagogical perspective is concerned with establishing connections between societal structures and individuals’ lived experiences. Such an approach requires a reflective engagement with categories and

societal ascriptions and also involves the construction of normality along with its embedded inequalities, evaluative systems, and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, educators should consciously refrain from orienting themselves towards notions of ‘normal learners’ or ‘normal students’ and ensure that equal opportunity and fairness—understood as the ability to access learning content and acquire knowledge—are made possible. Accordingly, the intersectional perspective can and should also be applied as a reflective tool that allows for a more nuanced consideration of the target group in a given educational context, and provides space for discussing both self- and external perceptions of subject positions as well as the embedded systems of devaluation and evaluation, thereby opening up new options for action. Only then does intersectionality become a “model that supports sensitivity to power relations and, in terms of an empowerment-oriented understanding of political education, contributes to the addressees’ understanding of societal conditions—and to the expansion of their possibilities to influence them” (Offen, 2019, p. 7).

With regard to addressing antifeminism in educational contexts, incorporating an intersectional perspective requires, on the one hand, a sensitization to the current manifestations of antifeminist ideologies and the ways in which different identities are either valorized or devalued and which power structures are thereby reinforced. Based on the recognition that ideologies typically do not occur in isolation but are connected with other devaluing narratives, there is, on the other hand, a need to consider and make visible the ideologies of inequality embedded in antifeminism. Such an undertaking means, for example, that following events such as New Year’s Eve in Cologne 2015/16, the differing impacts of sexist and racist discrimination should be brought to the fore—not to pit them against each other, but to analyze and reflect on their intertwinements. This can sensitize young people to the globally emerging phenomenon of the threat of sexualized violence, address the pitfalls of racist interpretations such as trivialization or denial of corresponding incidents in the dominant society, and foster empathy with those affected. Simultaneously, it becomes possible to discuss the causes of sexist and antifeminist discrimination and to propose options for action to prevent such ideologies and their practical implementation. Last but not least, this approach also enables addressing gender-specific demands on the subject and finding mitigating strategies in dealing with them. It is also crucial to place a differentiated view of immigration—particularly of men who are marked as ‘foreign’—at the center of the discussion, in order to counteract racist ideologies.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt was made—drawing on the debates surrounding the evaluation of the sexualized assaults on New Year’s Eve in Cologne 2015/16—to discuss the utility of intersectional approaches for analyzing the relationship between antifeminism, racism, and sexism, as well as the far-right co-optation of critiques of sexism. It became clear that adopting an intersectional, identity- and society-critical perspective on antifeminism as an intersectional ideology entails that antifeminism cannot be considered in isolation from other societal ideologies such as sexism, LGBTIQ-hostility, (anti-Muslim) racism, or even antisemitism. On the contrary, antifeminism is interwoven with these and other ideologies of inequality, which mutually constitute and

enable one another. Together, they serve the (re)stabilization of power, domination, and hierarchical relations. Following Stögner's approach, the intersectional perspective makes it possible to expose the racist and sexist inscriptions embedded in antifeminist discourses and, for example, to demonstrate—based on the analysis of New Year's Eve in Cologne—that no right-wing critique of sexism can be found that is not simultaneously racialized. Intersectional feminism thus functions, as Kimberlé Crenshaw—the founder of intersectionality theory—has observed, “as a prism for understanding the ways in which different forms of inequality often interact and exacerbate one another.”

With regard to educational contexts, this implies “the task for educators and educational practitioners to engage critically with these conditions in terms of power and sensitivity to differences, and to generate learning opportunities from them—for the group and continually for themselves. Depending on the learning group and thematic context, educators may face considerable challenges for which there are no panaceas. These requirements must be reflected upon repeatedly—before, during, and after an educational event” (de Coester et al., 2016, p. 5). Recognizing the intertwinement of these ideologies also involves raising awareness of the multiple oppressions that affect people differently depending on their social position. Nonetheless, the primary focus remains on the oppressive relations themselves, which must be transformed at the structural level and cannot be resolved solely through compensatory measures for experiences of oppression, such as necessary affirmative action programs for women or anti-discrimination policies. To undermine the foundations of ideologies of inequality, it has been shown that a (self-)reflective, identity- and society-critical understanding of the intersectionality of ideologies is required.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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