

“Nous Allons Le
Faire Pour 50% de
Notre Population”

CONSTRUCTING GENDER IN THE DEBATES OF THE
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



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Theoretical and methodological frame

- Discourse theoretical approach: discourses as archives of knowledge (including practices and institutions) which allow the meaning-making and interpretation of the world to individual and collective actors (Foucault).
- Parliaments as performative structures (Beaudoin, 2013): meaning-making in staged settings and through performative speech acts. The focus lies on the performance in plenary debates, not the policy-making nor the negotiations behind closed doors.
- The aim is to re-construct discourses through plenary statements exclusively.
- Methodological lens: Political Performance Framework (Rai, 2015)
- Epistemic preconceptions and rhetorical strategies provide the construal background to render discourses on gender intelligible.

Case example: Women in economic hierarchies

The following debates are analysed:

- Women and business leadership, on 5 July 2011
- Gender balance among non-executive directors of companies listed on stock exchanges, on 19 November 2013

The presence of absence in the performative setting

In the debates on inner-European gendered hierarchies, male participants are strikingly rare. If we take presence and non-presence as performative acts (which I would argue for), the absence of men in these debates is as important as the presence of women, it is a manifest realization of a gender discourse.

Absence does not imply disempowerment automatically, but can refer to a complex triad between presence/absence – visibility/invisibility – power/subjection. Each position in the binary can pair with each other position in the triad, leading to permeability and ambiguousness in the binary.

This performative setting of mainly female MEPs discussing issues of gender equality allows several interpretations. The female discussants are by no means disempowered, in fact they act as legislators. Meanwhile, in being absent, the male MEPs give away power/influence.

Still, in being absent, men participate as much as the present women in generating meaning-making on gender: Women are seen as experts when it comes to gender, while men are not. This notion is, with inverted validation, a continuation of gender discourses that treat women as “the sex” while men are human standard. Here, it is still women who know about gender just because they are women, which suggests that “gender” somehow is synonymous to “woman”: while men continue to be humans, women are humans with a gender.

Negative andrology on the backdrop of the financial crisis

“If Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters...” as a metaphor for the belief that masculine-connoted financial capitalism has caused the economic crisis, while a feminine-connoted economy could have prevented it.

“These [requirements] can be found in female gifts. I say ‘gifts’ because, apart from their knowledge and education [i.e. professional qualification on par with men], women have special skills, which are very important to companies, to administration and to communication with the market.” (Rodi Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou, reporting speaker, 2011)

“Gender diversity on boards leads to more sustainable decisions and therefore to a more resistant European economy.” (Antigoni Papadopoulou, S&D, 2013)

This refers to a gender discourse Kucklick (2008) calls „negative andrology“, and which defines masculinity as a destructive, immoral force. This does not imply the call for gender equality, and it has been closely linked to capitalist productivity (in positive terms). However, this link seems to be reevaluated currently: Masculinity is connected to economy failure, while femininity is validated as leading to sustainable economic activity.

Revaluation of gender capital in the post-industrial capitalism

“Research has clearly shown [...] that, when women are involved in companies’ decision-making bodies, they turn in better results, perform better and are more efficient.” (Rodi Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou, author, 2011)

“It is also important to recognize the link between the presence of competence and women’s roles in corporate governance with a different approach to process management, optimal use of human resources, anti-discrimination rules and sustainable productivity which they often guarantee.” (Silvia Costa, S&D, 2011)

“Not only is this a waste of talent, it is also a missed opportunity to make better decisions leading to better financial results in the highest bodies of our listed companies. [...] More women in management positions provide a broader insight into economic behavior, into consumers’ choices, leading to market share gains.” (Viviane Reding, Vice-President of the Commission, 2013)

“It is not only synonymous with a fairer economy, it is also smart businesses [sic!].” (Zita Gurmai, S&D, 2013)

Revaluation of gender capital in the post-industrial capitalism

Complex changes in society, education, labour market and culture led to a revaluation of female abilities.

Women are seen as a valuable human resource not because of their training, not so much because of their “soft skills”, but because they are women. The very belonging to a specific gender – in that case, not sex – ensures an according set of experiences that makes women probably fitter for postindustrial economy than men. This perceived competitive advantage I call “gender capital”. It operate through the culturalization of social differences.

The economic language used to legitimise gender equality in economic decision-making reflects the complex relation between capitalist logics and value-based, probably critical, „republican“ pathos: Rather than an appropriation of emancipative critic through neoliberal economies, this relationship is based on a productive co-construction of societal knowledge.

Values and economic utilitarianism

"[...] the idea that economic and business leadership is the exclusive prerogative of men has long been untenable." (Edit Bauer, PPE, 2011)

"The established and prevailing monocultures in leading business positions are no longer acceptable, either from an economic or from a social perspective." (Andrea Češková, ECR, 2011)

"The under-exploited pool of well educated women represents a real untapped potential for the EU economy, especially at a time when human capital is a key factor in terms of competitiveness and when, as a society, we are ageing." (Viviane Reding, Vice-President of the Commission)

"We can simply not afford to recruit managers from only one half of the population." (Britta Thomsen, S&D)

"[...] because gender equality at work is not only a women's issue: it is a business issue. It is an economic imperative." (Viviane Reding, Vice-President of the Commission)

Outlook: Re-conceptualization of gender binaries

Traditional gender discourses are predominantly rejected in the EP debates. Especially the notion of biologist essentialism and consequential gender hierarchies is repelled.

Gender is no longer seen as a purely biological determination, but rather as a specific set of characteristics that has been appropriated by men and women differently throughout their process of gendered socialization.

This conception is not independent from biology, as the assignment of gender still uses (binary) biological demarcations, and has biological consequences.

There is some essentialism in the new conception. It is claimed that all women share specific abilities, experiences and wishes, whereas a slightly broader variety among men is allowed.

Literature

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