



**RESIST**

Fostering Queer Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

# The RESIST project: Swiss Case Study Findings



UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG  
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG



Lucerne University of  
Applied Sciences and Arts

HOCHSCHULE  
LUZERN



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## Swiss Case Study Findings

### Swiss Parliament Findings

#### *Introduction*

It is important to note that the period included in this study is characterised by several important legislative changes in the realm of gender equality in Switzerland. In **December 2018**, the anti-racism article in the criminal code was extended to include a ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation (Article 261 bis) after an optional referendum triggered a popular vote in 2020. In **December 2020**, the Swiss federal government and parliament approved the opening of civil marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples. After an optional referendum triggered a popular vote in 2021, the Swiss electorate voted with a large margin (by a nearly two-thirds majority) in favour of amending the marriage laws.

Since **January 2021**, transgender persons or persons with a gender variance can change their official gender record and first name quickly and without bureaucratic complications. In **December 2022**, however, the Swiss government contested the introduction of a third gender option or no-gender option for official records. The statement on the government website, announced that “The social conditions for the introduction of a third gender or for a general waiver of the gender entry in the civil status register do not currently exist. A change to the binary gender model would also entail numerous amendments to the constitution and federal and cantonal laws” (portal of the Swiss government, 21.12.2022).

Political debates relating to these legal changes were therefore dominant in the data. Additionally, the report considers a range of other relevant debates focusing on or touching upon issues related to gender and sexuality. As mentioned previously, the majority of contributions that oppose or criticise gender and sexual equalities are made by MPs of SVP (66%), followed by the Centre (26%), and EDU (8%). The thematic clusters identified from the Swiss parliamentary debates revealed that the majority of contestations around gender and sexual equalities emerge through technocratic and legalistic discourses. Openly hostile

or inflammatory written and oral contributions exist but are the minority. This demonstrates that opposition against gender and sexual equalities does not have to come in the form of emotionally charged and pronounced ideological discourses. The main findings from the parliamentary data analysis (corpus spanning 2018-2023) are the following:

- **The reification of sex as a biological category is a consistent reference point in debates.** This was particularly evident in the use of evidence from medical sciences by MPs from across the political spectrum. Polemic statements that made reference to ‘gender ideology’, served as frequent asides in debates and sought to call-out an unscientific departure from naturalist understandings of gender and sexuality.
- **Medical discourses, especially psychiatric and psychological discourses, remain central to transgender discussions, and are drawn on by both proponents and opponents of trans rights.** In debates around gender recognition, the introduction of gender identity as a protected legal category, or the creation of an administrative third gender, biology and "medical facts" are claimed as a legitimate basis for jurisdiction and bureaucratic processes, while “ideology”, personal feeling or “fashionable ideas” are discounted as arbitrary and dangerous for the “natural” order. Verena Herzog (Swiss People’s Party) argued, for example, “To ensure legal certainty, the change of gender must be based as far as possible on biological and medical facts and realities. In order to prevent arbitrariness and bureaucracy, a change of gender in the civil status register must not only be made according to personal feeling.” (18.3696, 15.06.2018)
- **Legalistic and bureaucratic arguments operate as important vehicles to oppose LGBTIQ+ rights and policies.** For example, the creation of two posts that specialise in LGBTIQ+ politics within the government were flagged as too expensive. Moreover, the discourse of potential system abuse framed the debate surrounding the simplification of the process to change the assigned “sex”. Scenarios of potential system abuse are mentioned by some MPs in relation to pension age and military service, as Philipp Mathias Bregy (The Centre) notes: “We are of the opinion that abuse cannot be ruled out. We would like to emphasise that we do not believe that abuse will occur among those who are actually affected, but rather among those who use this regulation to abuse it” (19.081, 07.12.2020)
- **The figure of the vulnerable child** emerges through multiple recurring tropes in the Swiss parliament and is particularly linked to the discourse of **sexualisation** and the **promotion of non-normative gender and sexual identities**. Although the Swiss parliament does not deal with questions relating to school curricula as this falls under the responsibility of the cantons, sex education emerges as a theme in relation to publicly funded national sexual health and sex education campaigns. The government is called upon by Verena Herzog (Swiss People’s Party) to answer for the content of its funded campaigns that are seen to promote inappropriate and immoral sexual practices and behaviours to children. In addition to this sexualization trope, the same

campaign is problematised for promoting non-normative gender and sexual identities of children.

- **Gender-affirming care is positioned as a threat to minors and this furthers the focus on the figure of the vulnerable child.** This trope is advanced by MPs from the Centre and the SVP. These voices make reference to an “exponential increase” in young people seeking medical gender reassignment. It is postulated that young people are animated to transition by the medical establishment irrespective of the “proven” dangers of gender affirming care for minors. The Swiss government is framed as lagging behind other countries that have already recognized “the dangers” of gender affirming care and that have reacted appropriately with bans and mandatory psychotherapy in lieu of affirming services. It is suggested that the medical establishment and intellectual circles are actively promoting trans-identities and treatments to young people while it is asserted that “even” trans organisations call for more caution, as the following interpellation submitted by Benjamin Roduit (The Centre) illustrates:

“In view of the sharp increase in the number of young patients in recent years and the negative and irreversible consequences of the treatments (cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis, infertility, higher risk of cancer and thrombosis), countries such as England, Sweden and Finland are in the process of adapting their guidelines. Even the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH), which is also in the process of revising its recommendations, is calling for restraint.” (21.4506: 16.12.2021)

- Children’s rights are mobilised to justify opposition to lesbian couples’ access to assisted reproductive technologies (ART). Opponents use a rights-based discourse to suggest an inherent **contradiction between lesbian parents’ rights and their children’s rights.** In lieu of a child’s right to know its origins, it is insisted that children have a right to be raised by their biological parents. This argument suggests that (biological) filiation is necessary for desirable parenting and the wellbeing of children:

“(Y)ou always talk about equal rights, and only about equal rights for adult, homosexual couples. But you always forget the weakest in our society, namely the children, who can neither defend themselves nor say anything about it. Where are the equal rights and especially the rights of children to mother and father in this bill?” (Martina Geissbühler, SVP, 13.468, 13.06.2020)

- **Linking homosexuality with paedophilia** (although not explicitly conflating the two terms) has also been observed in various statements by two members of the Swiss People’s Party. Homosexuality in association with pedophilia particularly surfaced in the context of the debates devoted to the extension of the scope of anti-racism laws to include discrimination based on sexual orientation. Anxiety that protecting people from homophobic statements might inadvertently provide protection to pedophilic

offenders is based on the assumption that the scope of what sexual orientation includes can potentially be very broad. Some MPs expressed their concerns with regard to the extension of the anti-racism legislation in the following manner: "And do other socially ostracised sexual practices such as necrophilia or zoophilia or the consumption of pornography also qualify under the new offence?" (Barbara Steinemann, SVP, 19.5318). In a similar vein, another SVP politician anticipates the scenario where the European Court would condemn Switzerland because of the confusion that the introduction of the new term (sexual orientation) would cause in courts: "(courts) have to decide whether pedophilia, bisexuality, gerontophilia, necrophilia, fetishism, zoophilia, and so on – human creativity in this area being inexhaustible – are sexual orientations which must be protected or which must not be. We are facing new condemnations by once again using terms that are ideologically very trendy, but as trendy as they are undefined" (Nidegger Yves, SVP, 13.407, 25.09.2018). Placing of homosexuality in close proximity with the "socially ostracised practices" contributes to discursive reproduction of homosexuality as a "threatening" or "deviant" practice.

- A small number of debates also sought to place **natalist discourses** in the debate. They were exclusively put forward by members of the Swiss People's Party and failed to spark larger debates. They sought to make access to assisted reproductive technologies (18.4021, 28.09.2018) more accessible to women and to foreground information on the medical risks of abortions in abortion consultations (20.3301, 05.05.2020).
- Opposition to equalities was often mediated through the idea that they go "**too far**". Into this category fall political arguments that claimed that going "too far" with a proposition would either lead to a loss of support by political actors or the people or that they would torment the legal system, and lead to a multiplicity of problems. In relation to a potential introduction of the legal category of gender identity, Karl Vogler (The Centre) argues:
 

"An extension to include the concept of gender identity threatens a total collapse of the bill, a total collapse (...). However, the concerns – which incidentally coincide with those of the Federal Council – that interpretation problems could arise with the criterion of the concept of gender identity, which was previously unknown in Swiss law (...)" (13.407, 03.12.2018)
- Related to this idea of equalities going too far and tormenting the system was also the idea that **equalities are a top-down, undemocratic, "socialist" tool** that aims to reorganise society. Although this argument did not take centre stage in the debates, it served as a trope in the background:

"This understanding of steering and control is fundamentally presumptuous and completely illiberal. My understanding of democracy is different. Society

shapes, directs and legitimises the state and not the other way round. This postulate makes radical socio-political demands, and these demands are to be imposed on society in an almost socialist manner. Just as we should be cautious about the state influencing language, we must not open up the law to extreme socio-political demands. Instead, we and the Federal Council should concentrate more on the core tasks of the rule of law - the security, freedom and independence of our country - and address the main concerns of the population, such as constantly rising health insurance premiums or the safeguarding of social security systems. To this end, we should present concrete solutions.” (Verena Herzog, Swiss People’s Party, 18.3690, 13.06.2019)

Notable here is also the reference to “real” material problems, to point to the allegedly excessive character of what is framed as symbolic/immaterial debates.

- Opposition to gender-inclusive language, which emerges as a site of mobilisation among both German- and French-speaking MPs, is one such example. Language, in this sense, exposes the persistence of heteronormative supremacy and the mechanisms of power and domination associated with it, hence it is opposed so fiercely. The excess, in this case, concerns the inclusion of non-binary gender identities in language. "Readability and comprehensibility are to be given higher weight than ideology. This is by no means to prevent the feminization of certain words in the sense of promoting more equality” (Benjamin Roduit, The Centre, 21.3143, 11.03.2021). This focus on language, pointing to excess in immaterial/symbolic debates, appears as a strategy to diminish the importance of the issue and actors advocating for gender justice. There were various attempts in the examined period where MPs tried to enforce a ban on gender inclusive language in order to halt the spread of ‘gender ideology’ through national institutions. While one parliamentary initiative aimed at banning inclusive language at the nationally funded, universities (22.475, 29.09.2022) with the argument that gender inclusive language confuses students, another motion sought to ban inclusive language in official documents of the Government (21.3143, 11.03.2021)
- Related to this was the idea that **publicly owned institutions are to remain politically neutral**. The Swiss post was problematized by one MP for issuing a stamp in celebration of the adoption of marriage equality (22.7763, 21.09.2022).
- An intersectional examination of the data illustrated that **gender inequalities were disproportionately associated with Muslim minorities**. MPs from the Swiss People’s Party and the Centre associated Muslim communities in Switzerland with increased domestic violence. MPs from the Swiss People’s Party and the Centre sought to table debates about the child headscarf (22.4559, 16.12.2022; 19.3049, 06.03.2019)

- Another trope that was put forward in relation to asylum seekers was the idea of asylum seeking women giving birth in order to **manipulate the asylum process** (17.3930, 29.09.2017) and asylum seekers transitioning in order to claim asylum based on their trans identity (18.4014, 28.09.2018). Both issues were tabled by an MP of the Swiss People's Party.

## Swiss Media Findings

The second step of the Swiss case study focused on mapping the circulation of anti-gender discourses in the national media. For this purpose, five newspapers were chosen that cover the conventional political spectrum. For the Swiss German case study, Die Weltwoche (German for "The World Week") was selected as a right-wing oriented weekly magazine, Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ) as an established centre-right daily, and WOZ (Die Wochenzeitung) as a left-wing Swiss German-language weekly newspaper. Papers covered in the French-language sample (Romandie) include Le Temps, a national mainstream newspaper published in Lausanne and Geneva and La Tribune de Genève, a regional daily usually considered centre-right and owned by private media group Tamedia. Additionally, 20 Minuten and 20 Minutes Romandie have been chosen for both French and German-language newspapers in Switzerland. They are free daily newspapers entirely funded by advertisement and mostly consisting of short articles.

The comparative newspaper analysis, comprising 162 articles, revealed the following insights:

- The German-language right-wing newspaper Die Weltwoche has the highest number of articles in our sample (almost 40% of the corpus). This illustrates that in the Swiss German right-wing media discourse, topics related to all used search terms, namely 'gender-ideology', 'transgender' and 'woke' are popular and constitute a significant area of coverage.
- The phrase 'gender-ideology' (in its German and French spelling variants, including "*théorie du genre*") appeared significantly more frequently in the selected German-language press (40 times) than in the French-language press (15 times) over the period. Given its fairly wide circulation in the German-language press, the phrase 'gender-ideology' appears to have established itself as a recognizable and legitimate concept in German-speaking Switzerland. In Swiss French media, the concept is used significantly less frequently and mostly as an explicitly polemical expression. "*Théorie du genre*" is used to convey a similar, however less controversial and more naturalised meaning.
- Right-wing extremism appears to be the dominant trigger issue in all German-language Swiss newspapers, except for the right-wing newspaper Die Weltwoche. A focused examination of the distribution of trigger issues in Die Weltwoche demonstrates that in our corpus 'gender ideology' is never featured in the

articles addressing right-wing extremism: instead it is featured in the context of commenting topics such as ‘woke’ politics, ‘cancelling/silencing’ and ‘sex-education at schools’. In contrast, ‘gender ideology’ in WOZ is mentioned in almost 60% of instances in the context of right-wing activism.

- The dominant trigger issues in the French-language press are ‘woke’, followed by ‘trans issues/activism’ and ‘cancelling/silencing’. The convergence of two historical contexts can account for such dominance. First, the period of the sample was when the French word ‘wokisme’ adapted from the English ‘woke’, came to replace previous expressions used to denigrate progressive politics, such as “*islamo-gauchisme*”, “*intersectionnalité*” or “*néo-féminisme*” in the French media sphere and that of French-speaking regions of Switzerland and Belgium. The notion of a “*théorie du genre*” (gender theory) had been especially widespread in the early 2010s during protests against marriage equality in France (which eventually came into law in 2013) (Carnac 2014). However, it subsequently receded from a stand-alone issue to being gradually embedded within a broader denunciation of progressive politics encapsulated by the term ‘wokisme’ and its derivatives. Since the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020, French and Swiss uses of the term alike also increasingly encompassed racial justice (Mahoudeau, 2022). Second, a significant proportion of 2022 newspaper articles in the sample about anti-gender politics in Romandie pertained to the controversy over anti-trans talks at the University of Geneva (see controversy findings, below). Protests over the talks were almost exclusively described by the French-language mainstream and conservative press as an importation of cancel culture into Switzerland, hence the common association of trans issues with cancelling and silencing in the media sample.
- Whenever more than one trigger issue is dominant in a newspaper article, it is a combination of ‘cancelling/silencing’, ‘trans issues/activism’ and ‘woke’ for both the Swiss German and the Swiss French media. In the French-language media, such associations of issues are mostly present in the context of covering protests against transphobic events in Romandie. ‘Cancelling/silencing’ in association with ‘trans issues/activism’ is mostly present in the articles of La Tribune de Genève, whereas in the Swiss German media, these issues are discussed together exclusively in coverage by Die Weltwoche. This clearly shows the newspapers’ discursive strategies when constructing gender-ideology as a problem.
- The distribution of newspapers by genres, demonstrates that the discussions around ‘gender ideology’ in the German-language press prevail in Comment/Opinion (60%) pieces as well as news CH (17%). In the French-language press, the dominant genres in which the phrase ‘gender ideology’ are mentioned are News CH, and Editorial (20%). Such a high percentage of opinion pieces and domestic news coverage indicates that the newspapers/journalists are trying to situate gender ideology as a relevant issue in Switzerland.



- Mobilising key celebrities, i.e. established figures advocating anti-gender positions, appears to be a feature of the Swiss right-wing and conservative press. Transnationally known anti-gender actors are frequently featured in the news or mentioned in the comments/opinion pieces. In our sample of German- and French-speaking media combined, such transnationally established figures in anti-gender politics as Éric Marty, JK Rowling, Céline Masson, Caroline Eliacheff, Abigail Shrier, and Viktor Orbán are mentioned across the sample. In contrast, the left-wing newspaper WOZ predominately mentions domestic actors, commonly in light of concern over the increasing right-wing activism.
- The examination of the term ‘gender ideology’ reveals that in two thirds of all articles in our entire sample, the term is used without quotation marks, implying its discursive deployment is chiefly naturalised. ‘Gender ideology’ in quotation marks presents itself mostly in WOZ (36%), NZZ (27%), and La Tribune de Genève (22%). In many instances, the use of quotation marks might be seen as a way of taking critical distance from a term (‘gender ideology’), however linguistic conventions might have a contributing role as to the usage of quotation marks, therefore this finding is qualified.
- The Swiss German language newspaper Die Weltwoche occasionally features the phrase ‘gender ideology’ in the titles of the articles. However, in all other newspapers in our sample it emerges predominantly in the article body. Here is one example of such a title: Die Weltwoche, 30.06.2022, “What is a woman? Gender ideologists claim that gender can be chosen. I can reassure you: Sexual biology is very clear on this issue”. The prevalence of ‘gender ideology’ in the titles of Die Weltwoche indicates that the term is well-understood by the newspaper's readership.
- Definitions of ‘gender ideology’ are rarely provided in an explicit form. In some cases, periphrastic formulas can be considered definition-like, in others the meaning is diffused in the context. Such fluidity and lack of definition of the term allow it to move and morph. But mostly, ‘gender ideology’ is used within texts as a matter of fact, as if it has a status and coherence as an ‘ideology’ that should be readily legible for readers.

Some qualitative insights help illustrate the quantitative findings above by showing the key themes in which the phrase ‘gender ideology’ was problematized in different media outlets. The following narratives frequently emerged in Die Weltwoche.

- Gender ideology in Die Weltwoche is often reported as a threat to the legacy of women or to the advocacy for women's rights:  

“What is a woman? For Ulrich Kutschera, the author of our cover story, sexual biology provides an unambiguous answer: contrary to the claims of gender ideologues, the female ovaries define a woman. Everything that constitutes visible ‘womanhood’, right down to the fat-padded curves of the body, is

controlled by these primary sexual organs. He is convinced that the rights of those women who feel their womanhood is something natural are threatened by the increasingly intrusive gender ideology.” (Weltwoche, 30.06.2022)

Grounded in biological essentialism, this article argues that the sex-based understanding of gender roles is necessary “for those women who feel their womanhood” in order to maintain it.

- Trans issues in general and, in the context of children in particular, are often discussed in hostile and sensationalist ways. For example, an article, with the catchy title “Gender-ideology confuses an entire generation” constructs gender ideology as a threat because children are regularly exposed to “transgenderism” in educational and medical institutions.

“The situation has changed dramatically in recent years. Girls in particular are subject to a transgender trend. Author Abigail Shrier speaks of “transgender madness.” A whole network of educators, psychiatrists, teachers and doctors pushes young people to consider transgender as a normal life option, with irreversible damages [...]. Anyone who asks critical questions is hushed up or pilloried, as Shrier has repeatedly experienced.” (Urs Gehrig, 26.11.2020)

A similar narrative, about educational and medical institutions encouraging gender reassignment, although as a separate incident, has also presented itself in our corpus of parliamentary debates.

- ‘Gender ideology’ is often discussed as a threat to freedom of speech. In an article from 13.10.2022 Anabel Schunke writes:

“As if the linguistic discrediting from the left-wing was not enough, the so-called ‘hate crime’ came into play. Anyone who contradicts the woke ideology is spreading ‘hate and incitement’ - and must be punished. [...] In the process, the corridor of what can be said is narrowed further and further, and the catalogue of what counts as ‘hate speech’ is expanded at will.”

According to the author, freedom of speech, which is already being restricted by “left-wing cancel culture”, is being further compromised by the expansion of the Article 261 bis (referring to the anti-racism legislation which was expanded to include protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation).

- Providing a platform for transnationally recognized anti-gender actors is another feature of Die Weltwoche coverage. They frequently feature the active actors of the categories mentioned above, inviting them as guests, publishing their articles and interviews with them, promoting and reporting on their events, and picturing them as reliable experts. For example, Abigail Shrier is featured in the context of “transgender madness”.

- ‘Gender-ideology’ presentation in the centrist newspaper Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ), reveals a mixed sample of opinions and discussions in which the term is used. A significant number of NZZ articles in our corpus discuss ‘gender ideology’ in the context of right-wing extremist tendencies, namely that they gain momentum by appropriating the topic of gender. At the same time, there is an equally significant number of articles, containing the phrase ‘gender ideology’, which to a large extent echo the narratives of Die Weltwoche. For example, in an article from 07.03.2023, Giuseppe Gracia talks about:

“gender extremists”: “who deny nature, ignore scientific findings and engage in ideological linguistic confusion”.

Gender extremists in the author's view are as dangerous to society as anti-racism and climate extremists:

“When it comes to racism, the future should also be about standing up for the values of liberalism as a majority society, for the equality of all before the law. But the problem should not be left to the radicals, who are proclaiming a new, woke racism with their doctrine of original sin for whites.”

Gender, anti-racism and climate activism are recurrently discussed in NZZ as involving ‘totalitarian politics’. Some authors even suggest practical solutions to stop their spread:

“It is important to counter tendencies that demand totalitarian allegiance, whether on climate, gender or other issues. The non-admission of entire social movements to debates and forums. The tendentious selection of talk show guests and the erroneous idea that relevant, unpopular opinions can be excluded and politics can be bypassed”, according to Ralf Schuler, NZZ, 16.01.2023

- The left-wing newspaper WOZ presents a strikingly different narrative to the other two newspapers. The phrase ‘gender ideology’ was mentioned most frequently in the context of increasing right-wing extremism. In many instances, the authors critically engage with the right-wing arguments of the other media outlets. For example, in an article from 27.10.2022, Anna Jikhareva problematizes the tendency by some media outlets to discuss the left-wing and right-wing protests as “two extremes”, such relativism, in the author’s opinion, leads to the “trivialization of right-wing violence”:

“Interesting point about those who equate right-wing violence with radical left-wing politics – true to the ‘horseshoe theory’ – also contribute to the trivialization of right-wing violence. A current example is a ‘Tagesschau’ report from Sunday, in which an anti-fascist demonstration in Bern is contrasted with the Tanzhaus attack. Thus, the events appear merely as two ‘extremes’ to which

the ‘reasonable’ centre remains at equidistance - with the consequence that the concerns of neo-Nazis are ultimately legitimised.”

## **Swiss Controversy Mapping Findings**

In its third step, the Swiss case study focused on examining two different episodes of anti-gender mobilisations. Both events unfolded in 2022, one in the French- and the other in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The Swiss German analysis focused on examining the media coverage of a “Drag Story Time” event for kids in Zurich, which was violently disrupted in October 2022 by a young neo-Nazi group. This controversy reveals how gender-related issues, particularly in relation to children, are appropriated by diverse actors as a strategy to engage the public in anti-gender politics. It also sheds light on the role of the right-wing media and politics in contributing and encouraging such events. The Swiss French case study analysed the media coverage of the cancellation of two transphobic talks at the University of Geneva in April and May 2022, unveiling the transnational dimension of anti-trans activism as well as the argument of free speech for justifying anti-gender discourse. Both controversies illustrated the centrality of children in anti-gender and anti-trans activism.

### ***Swiss Controversy 1: Junge Tat disrupting “Drag Story Time” event for kids in Zurich***

- Right-wing extremists gain momentum by appropriating the topic of gender. The right-wing media as well as political campaigns against gender topics have been widespread lately, allowing the far-right extremist groups to jump on board and claim that they are saying what others are saying. Such co-optation of gender topics can be seen as a tactic to gain more public support.
- Right-wing and conservative media have capitalised on the event, by shifting attention towards the discussion of the supposed danger of “(trans)gender ideology” to children and society in general. Some opinion pieces and news articles invited their readers to critically engage with the danger of such lessons to children. For example, an NZZ article alarmed: “Reading lesson with the drag queen. The gender obsession is making its way into pedagogy.” (Brigit Schmid, 10.11.2022) Die Weltwoche published several news articles and opinion pieces comparing open conversations with kids about diversity and inclusion to a sect, more specifically a “transgender sect”:

“Above all, however, intransigence towards ‘heretics’ who use biological facts to reduce the transgender sect to absurdity characterises the religious dogmatism of this ideology. We know from reports that children who grow up in the sects become dependent and anxious adults. It would be advisable to prevent this social trend.” (Elena Louisa Lange, Weltwoche.ch, 20.05.2022)

- Furthermore, the discourse in the Swiss German right-wing media sparked by the Junge Tat demonstration at “Drag Story Time” was as much about delegitimizing trans and LGBTIQ+ lives as it was about legitimising a range of politics —neo-Nazis, far right, the extreme centre. An example of this is Die Weltwoche article, titled: “The New Self-Congratulation: Drag Queen story-time for Children, like the ones currently taking place in Zurich, are the New Favorite Hobby of a Complacent ‘Left-Wing Bourgeoisie’.” A quote from die Weltwoche:

“Once a subculture of nightlife and partying, a new generation of drag queens are making themselves available as state transgender representatives. The audience consists of parents in creative and academic professions who squeeze themselves and their offspring into Fjällräven backpacks, dutifully state their pronouns, always have their FFP-2 masks to hand and insult anyone walking on the cycle path as a ‘Nazi’.” (Elena Louisa Lange, Weltwoche.ch, 20.05.2022)

Striking in this example is the collective delegitimization of the actors promoting diversity and inclusion, who are characterised as left-wing bourgeois representatives of intellectual and creative professions. On the opposite spectrum the newspaper argues that people who do not support these liberal ideas are therefore vulnerable to being labelled “Nazi”.

In a similar vein, Die Weltwoche justifies the refusal of the SVP to join other political parties in condemning the actions of Junge Tat. In an article from 03.11.2022, Die Weltwoche author Christoph Mörgeli writes:

“A few right-wing extremists disrupted the drag queens' story hour. The parties represented in the city parliament wanted to condemn this in a joint statement. The SVP refused this request. Rightly so.” (Weltwoche, Christoph Mörgeli, 04.11.2022)

According to the author, this decision of SVP is justified because it is their right:

"to reserve the freedom to oppose the early sexualization of children. And to engage critically with the LGBTQ movement. Because the others want to enforce nothing other than the following view: Anyone who disagrees with gender ideology and claims that there are two biological genders is a Nazi".

- Another technique of the right-wing media is to question the appropriateness of investing taxpayers' money in such activities as drag story-time for kids. For example, Joyce Kung in Die Weltwoche, suggests:

"Parents can decide for themselves whether they want to send their children to attend a story-time with pompously disguised men in women's dresses. But if they want it, they should pay for it. And not the taxpayers" (Weltwoche, Joyce Kung, 23.09.2022).

This argument echoes the narrative which surfaced in the parliamentary discourse in relation to the content of sex education brochures, pointing to the synergies in some media and political anti-gender narratives.

- Another feature characterising the coverage of the Swiss German controversy is the predominant focus on actors and practices rather than knowledge. Although most articles have condemned the actions of Junge Tat, for example Schaffhauser Nachrichten (27.10.2022) asks: "Where is the outrage when Nazis march?", much less attention has been given in the press to criticism of other actors advancing the same ideas. There are occasional articles by liberal media outlets discussing the implication in this controversy of some Swiss political parties, for example an article in tagesanzeiger.ch (27.10.2022):

“This is how the SVP helps the neo-Nazis. The other Zurich parties condemned the action of the neo-Nazis at the Tanzhaus, the SVP pressed around - and supported the concerns of the extremists. Why is this dangerous?”

- Left-wing media, on the contrary, emphasised that the ideas spread by the right-wing and conservative outlets, as well as right-wing politicians, were active contributions to the Junge Tat attack on the drag story-time event for kids:

“ The fact that the neo-Nazis seem to feel safe in urban areas is not least thanks to a public that makes their way of thinking acceptable. The physical attack on the reading lesson was preceded by a verbal one: ‘Activist ideologues will stop at nothing’, wrote Weltwoche at the end of September. The NZZ also hardly misses an opportunity to demonise ‘gender ideology’. Add to this a retiring Federal Councillor who provokes with his statements against ‘woke culture’, or a candidate for office who declares war on the ‘transgender craze’” (Anna Jikhareva, WOZ, 27.10.2022)

- “Name Calling” as a tactic to make queer activists and events publicly known was mentioned in different media outlets: Daniel Binswanger, an author for the liberal republik.ch wrote in 20.05.2023:

"In 'Weltwoche daily' this week, Köppel not only declared ‘Drag Story Time’ to be an attack on traditional family values, but also named the time and place of the event - a repeat of the implicit incitement to violence in the style of Glarner.” (referring to Andreas Glarner of the SVP).

Another article in the NZZ, published on 02.12.2022, also mentioned "public naming" as a tactic used by Junge Tat (referring to the video where young neo-Nazis named and declared Brandy Butler an enemy). (NZZ, Giorgio Scherrer 02.12.2022)

### ***Swiss Controversy 2: Protests over controversial anti-trans talks at UNIGE***

The Swiss Romand controversy that erupted in the spring of 2022 over the protests held against controversial talks at University of Geneva inaugurated a intense period of anti-trans expression in the media and public discourse, especially around access to gender-affirmative care for trans minors, detransitioning (rts.ch 02.03.2023), and as broader negative discourses about the excesses of “wokisme” (French transliteration) and “cancel culture” (English expression used in French).

- A defining feature of the 2022 Geneva events was their instantiation of the transnational circulation of gender debates and anti-gender discourse, in this case the influence of French debates and French political and intellectual actors over the Romand discussion. All three controversial speakers invited to give talks on UNIGE premises (Co-authors Céline Masson and Caroline Eliacheff on the one hand, and Eric Marty on the other) came from Paris or had been active in the Paris intellectual

scene, with books by French publishers (*Les Editions de l'Observatoire*, and *Les Editions du Seuil*, respectively).<sup>1</sup> *La fabrique de l'enfant transgenre* had already been promoted by French anti-trans organisations such as the Paris-based Observatoire de la Petite Sirène (founded by Masson and Eliacheff) and Marty's book had been discussed in Parisian media and intellectual spaces. Versions of the Geneva talks had already been given across France.

- Conversely, critical accounts of both the events and the books by Geneva student union activists also found inspiration in contemporaneous interventions within the French discussion.<sup>2</sup> For example, their analysis of Marty's book made wide use of blog articles in online media *Médiapart* by Antoine Idier, a French cultural historian and critic.<sup>3</sup> On October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2022, Geneva students seeking intellectual support invited Paris-based Alex Mahoudeau, author of the recently published *La Panique Woke* (Textuel, 2022), to speak alongside local scholars and activists.<sup>4</sup> In addition to its in-house editorials, the Romand conservative press mainly outsourced the most incendiary comments on the controversy to interviewed intellectuals from France, such as media pundit Peggy Sastre<sup>5</sup> (who is "interested in gender from a biological angle") or the book authors themselves,<sup>6</sup> whereas more moderate Swiss interviewees, commentators and op-ed authors were mostly recruited among local politicians, such as Alexandre de Senarclens (PLR, centre-right) and Dorina Xhixho (LGBTQ representative for the Geneva Socialist Party, centre-left), or university officials (such as UNIGE president Yves Flückiger).
- A second feature of both mainstream and conservative coverage of the UNIGE controversy was its notable circumvention of a substantive discussion of contents, in favour of a focus on what were reductively presented as threats to free speech in Swiss academia. Thus, Nathalie Piégay, director of the department of Modern French, who had invited Eric Marty, explained after the protest:

"As far as I am concerned, I am keen to maintain a peaceful work atmosphere, open to contradiction, without intimidation. I think controversy is necessary to intellectual and democratic life. By definition it has all its place in academia.

<sup>1</sup> Céline Masson and Caroline Eliacheff, *La Fabrique de l'enfant-transgenre*. Paris : Editions de l'Observatoire, 2022; Eric Marty, *Le sexe des Modernes. Pensée du Neutre et théorie du genre*. Paris: Seuil, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> CUAÉ, "Répression à l'université et autres histoires de transphobie," *Renversé.co*, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> À propos du Sexe des modernes et d'un problème plus général : la critique «de gauche», *blogs.mediapart.fr*, it published on May 17<sup>th</sup> on the very day of Marty's Geneva talk; and *Le livre homophobe et transphobe de Marty, la critique culturelle et la psychanalyse*, published on *blogs.mediapart.fr* on May 30<sup>th</sup> about two weeks after Marty's Geneva talk.

<sup>4</sup>

<https://cuae.ch/enregistrement-de-la-conference-transphobie-et-repression-retour-sur-une-polemique-reactionnaire/>

<sup>5</sup>

<https://www.watson.ch/fr/suisse/lgbtiq%2b/353800979-l-uni-de-geneve-la-liberte-attaquee-par-des-activistes-lgbtiq>, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.lepeuple.ch/le-prof-attaque-a-geneve-regle-ses-comptes/>



I'm ready to meet and dialogue with members of the trans community, who in return have to admit that one should also be able to hear discourses with which one does not agree.”<sup>7</sup>

On the online website, watson.ch, speaking with less nuance about student activists, Peggy Sastre declared: “they make me think of 1920-1930s Fascists.”<sup>8</sup> The article featuring an interview with her, written by Antoine Menuisier, mentioned what it considered a local precedent with the non-inclusion of cis-men in a feminist assembly organised by the UNIGE student union in 2021<sup>9</sup> while connecting the current protests with all of two examples of “previous intimidations” in French universities over the past years.

In Marty's Swiss interview over the controversy, given exclusively to the conservative newspaper *Le Peuple* (which is led by a self-described “Christian and independent” editorial team)<sup>10</sup>, the author of *Le sexe des modernes* condemned student protesters as “pseudo-trans” who refused “dialogue” and decried a “Fascist behaviour,” by “petty-bourgeois [youth], only able to imitate what is being done elsewhere.”

This overall circumvention of contents and the absence of discussion about transphobia itself prevented the public from judging the legitimacy of the protests based on their substance, and instead allowed commentators to exclusively frame the protested speakers as victims of “cancel culture.” “We are stigmatised, accused of being reactionary”, explained Céline Masson<sup>11</sup> on Swiss evening TV news *Le 19h30* on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Conversely, Swiss Tabloid *Blick*, was the only one in the mainstream press to publish an editorial in support of student concerns (“It's a good thing we don't let transphobes have their say in academia”<sup>12</sup>, by Amit Juillard). Commenting ironically on the ubiquity of conservative actors invited to express themselves in the vast majority of news outlets and public arenas to claim that they could no longer speak their minds, it was also one of the only outlets to delve into the substance of the subject. For example, it amplified the voice of Romand trans care specialists refuting Masson & Eliacheff's claim that 90% of youth beginning a transition at age 15

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<https://www.watson.ch/fr/suisse/lgbtiq%2b/973817390-coup-de-force-lgbt-a-l-uni-de-geneve-nous-ne-nous-a-utocensurerons-pas>

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<https://www.watson.ch/fr/suisse/lgbtiq%2b/353800979-l-uni-de-geneve-la-liberte-attaquee-par-des-activistes-lgbtiq>

9

<https://www.watson.ch/fr/suisse/femmes/892314651-a-l-unige-les-hommes-exclus-d-une-assemblee-feministe>

<sup>10</sup> A caption under Eric Marty's photograph specifies “Fed up, Eric Marty decided to speak only to our newspaper.” <https://www.lepeuple.ch/le-prof-attaque-a-geneve-regle-ses-comptes/>

<sup>11</sup> 19h30, RTS, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022, <https://www.rts.ch/play/tv/emission/19h30?id=105932>

<sup>12</sup> Heureusement qu'on ne laisse pas les transphobes s'exprimer à l'université <https://www.blick.ch/fr/news/suisse/polemique-a-l-uni-de-geneve-heureusement-quon-ne-laisse-pas-les-trans-phobes-sexprimer-a-l-universite-id17574327.html>

regret it at age 20 (the actual figure in peer-reviewed scientific studies is 2%) and questioned the double standard allowing transphobic discourse in the name of free speech:

“If those talks had been racist or antisemitic, who would have been offended to see the authors of the books be denounced or getting roughed up? If the books presented had been written by white people seeking to control the life of Blacks deemed incapable of self-determination, would you have shed a tear on the altar of Voltaire?”.

While denouncing “repression” by university administration, on the left-wing Romand news website *Renversé* student union CUAE also offered a long rebuke of both books, attempting to refocus discussion on transphobia<sup>13</sup>, directing readers to a section of its own website providing a lengthy “*Dossier sur la transphobie d’Eric Marty*” dated June 2022.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure CH18:** Photograph of banner unrolled on the premises of UNIGE Uni-Mail building, June 2023

- Finally, a third key trope of the coverage of the UNIGE controversy was the framing of gender issues as opposing a camp of reason and science to a camp represented by activists and “extremism.”

This dichotomy already lay at the core of the discourse of the AMQG, a Geneva-based association founded in the spring of 2021 initially by parents hostile to their teenagers’ wish for gender transition, and calling for a “measured approach to gender questioning” against what they considered transgender activism.<sup>15</sup> AMQG promotes applying the “precautionary principle” to gender dysphoria in children, shunning any form of gender-affirmative care (presented as unsafe and ideological) in favour of

<sup>13</sup> “Répression à l’université et autres histoires de transphobie,” July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, <https://renverse.co/analyses/article/repression-a-l-universite-et-autres-histoires-de-transphobie-3617>

<sup>14</sup> <https://cuae.ch/quelques-ressources/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.amqg.ch/>

“exploratory psychoanalysis” aiming instead to treat the suffering caused by dysphoria without doing anything about it until adult age.

One form taken by the dichotomy during the Geneva events was that of an opposition between invited speakers open to intellectual discussion and protesters “refusing dialogue” or “opposed to debating” and “not constructive.” Thus, UNIGE communication officer Marco Cattaneo’s statement after the incidents objected that, although the talk (by Céline Masson and Caroline Eliacheff) was not organised by the university, whose premises had been rented by a psychoanalytic society, “... the refusal of dialogue expressed by this group of activists is totally contrary to the academic approach, we cannot endorse it.”<sup>16</sup> Chastising what he considered violent methods, he declared:

“We cannot tolerate such behaviours against academic freedom and insist on making a distinction between the fight against transphobia, which the university sticks to, and the activist elements of Tuesday night.”<sup>17</sup>

As it happens, contrasting UNIGE opposition to student protest is framed as ‘foolish’, with its stated rational support for Gender Studies and EDI policy key to the university’s discourse over the events:

UNIGE is “engaged in the fight against transphobia through its equality and diversity office, thanks to research carried out by the Centre Maurice Chalumeau [a well-funded institute promoting sexuality scholarship] or through student associations. It is attached to making knowledge progress on the complex question of gender and the personal and societal questions coming with it.”<sup>18</sup>

In summary, through mainstream and conservative framings in the Romand media sphere and academic institutions, student protests over transphobic contents were turned into the main problem to be dealt with, erasing the contradiction between professed general discourses against transphobia by UNIGE and the very substance of the talks and of the books they promoted.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.20min.ch/fr/story/des-militants-trans-empechent-la-tenue-dune-conference-187946547288>

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<https://www.watson.ch/fr/suisse/lgbtiq%2b/353800979-l-uni-de-geneve-la-liberte-attaquee-par-des-activistes-lgbtiq>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.20min.ch/fr/story/des-militants-trans-empechent-la-tenue-dune-conference-187946547288>