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**Sara de Jong & Susanne Kimm**

## **THE CO-OPTATION OF FEMINISMS: A RESEARCH AGENDA**

**Abstract** This article introduces the thematic section “The co-optation of feminisms: a research agenda,” which brings together contributions that discuss the appropriation, dilution and reinterpretation of feminist discourses, and practices by nonfeminist actors for their purposes. Recognizing the myriad ways in which feminist scholars and activists have shared their concerns with co-optation within their respective subfields, we propose that it is productive to develop a more substantive research agenda around co-optation. In the first section, we seek to contribute to this by synthesizing the scattered literature on co-optation in various feminist subfields. Subsequently, we present a selection of studies on co-optation published outside feminist studies in order to identify concepts and empirical insights that are instructive for developing a feminist research agenda on co-optation. This forms the basis for a set of guiding questions that we propose could be helpful in analyzing co-optation. The article finally presents the contributions to this thematic section and discusses what each article adds to our understanding and conceptualization of co-optation.

**Key words:** co-optation; mainstreaming; institutionalization; appropriation; complicity

### **Introduction**

Over the last decades, feminist activists, scholars and policy makers have witnessed the way feminist actors, practices and discourses have made inroads into state policies, international projects and political rhetoric (Halley 2006). As a result of the ‘success’ of feminist movements, institutions, organizations and other political actors increasingly felt required to adopt feminist rhetoric, albeit not always changing their (anti-feminist) ideologies (Ferguson 2005). The perceived success of feminisms and the incorporation of feminist ideas in mainstream politics deserve critical scrutiny. Nancy Fraser (2009, 2013a, 2013b) for example argues, that feminism inadvertently came to contribute to the political project of neoliberalism.

Andrea Smith (2006) uses the term “co-optation blues” to refer to the problematic effects of professionalization and bureaucratization of the anti-violence movement in the US. We think that “co-optation blues” aptly describes a common sentiment among feminists, which appears as the impetus behind many contributions on this topic; feminist scholars who are often simultaneously advocates and activists in particular fields, such as gender mainstreaming, witness with dismay how what they have lauded as the achievements of their struggles is transformed into an “uncanny double that [they] can neither simply embrace nor wholly disavow” (Fraser 2009: 114).<sup>i</sup> Refusing to be paralyzed, some scholars have started to develop interesting preliminary proposals for resisting co-optation within their respective subfields (Ferguson 2005; Swan and Fox 2010; Fraser 2009; 2013a, 2013b). We seek to address this blues by connecting the disappointments, concerns and dilemmas of different strands of feminism in an effort to explore what can be gained from employing the concept of co-optation to understand these processes, which we consider a precondition of an effective struggle against it.

Using the concept of “co-optation,” this thematic section seeks to contribute to a critical interrogation of feminist successes on the one hand and the problematic re-interpretation and employment of feminist ideas on the other. The section brings together contributions that discuss the appropriation, dilution, and reinterpretation of key feminist and gender concepts, discourses and practices by non-feminist actors for different political purposes. This article first offers an overview of feminist concerns with co-optation by synthesizing previously disparate debates in both feminist empirical studies and theory. It subsequently shifts its attention to work on co-optation outside feminist studies to identify theories, concepts and empirical insights that could be instructive for developing feminist debates on co-optation. It finally introduces the articles of this thematic section and contextualizes the contribution that each article makes to conceptualizing co-optation. This thematic section employs co-optation as the central concept and makes it the common denominator of the three articles, each based on research from separate fields in gender studies. This article as well as the thematic section as a whole, by collecting individual case studies, wants to make visible shared elements in a systematic way, thereby developing a research agenda on co-optation.

This thematic section is only the modest beginning of what we hope will constitute a collective feminist effort to understand and address co-optation. The analytical and political agenda are inevitably, true to feminist scholarship, closely intertwined. Understanding the political implications of conceptualizing co-optation means being aware of the traps that Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca (2013) have drawn attention to, such as the creation of a myth of an originary movement, and judging contemporary feminisms. While counter to Pablo Lapegna (2014), we think employing the term co-optation, if carefully conceptualized, has productive potential, we want to heed his warning that the term has “negative and pejorative resonances,” which could be a ‘veritable “conversation killer”’ between scholars and activists (also Najam 2000; Eschle and Maiguashca 2013). The challenge then is to rescue co-optation as an analytical term, while maintaining its political value for the ongoing project of developing collective feminist struggles. We therefore hope that this article, together with the three contributions to this thematic section, provide a constructive response to the task set by Eschle and Maiguashca, to develop “a more rigorous framework, replete with conceptual and empirical criteria, to help think through feminist possibilities” (2013: 649) in light of the challenges that feminisms have faced and continue to face.

### **Feminist debates on co-optation and their predecessors**

In a study on gender in EU policy, Maria Stratigaki has defined co-optation as follows: “In the cooptation process, the concept itself is not rejected, but its initial meaning is transformed and used in the policy discourse for a different purpose than the original one” (Stratigaki 2004: 36). While this definition focuses on the discursive aspect of co-optation, Myra Marx Ferree and Beth Hess (2000: 141), in their research on US feminist movements, also take into account the dimension of actors and institutions, when they understand co-optation as “being absorbed into the policy structures that one has been fighting against.” We start from the above definitions to discuss the co-optation of discourses and actors, but also extend it to include the co-optation of practices and programs.

The concern of feminist goals and practices being altered as feminists have started to occupy or influence positions of power in political institutions is nothing new (see Beckwith 1987, Ferree 1987, later also Boucher 2010). Feminist scholarship of the 1990s has discussed such issues under the labels of “state feminism” (e.g., McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995) or “femocrats” (e.g., Eisenstein 1990, Gouws 1996). ‘Femocrat,’ a combination of ‘feminist’ and ‘bureaucrat,’ is a term that emerged in the Australian context of the 1970s when a women’s policy machinery was created by the state (Sawer 1998). Femocrats were operating inside mainstream bureaucratic institutions in order to increase feminist influence, but at the same time their ‘success’ was seen to be dependent on maintaining relations with the autonomous women’s movement. While femocrats were seen critically by feminists that chose to remain outside established institutions, especially if they were not politicized inside the women’s movement (Miller and Razavi 1998), an alternative politics of disengagement from mainstream institutions was considered equally if not more risky (Razavi 1998). Jacqui True (2003: 368) has argued that the question “is not how feminist scholars and activists can avoid cooptation by powerful institutions, but whether we can afford *not to* engage with such institutions”.

Other work shifted the attention from the incorporation of actors to institutionalization of the women’s movement itself. Since the late 1990s concerns have been expressed about the ‘NGO-ization’ of the women’s movement which was seen to have the effect of deradicalizing feminist claims as the women’s movement started orienting itself towards mainstream politics and funding logics (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1998; Menon 2004). More recently, scholars have articulated the need to “go beyond tropes of autonomy and purity associated with the NGOization paradigm” (Roy 2015: 112) for a more nuanced analysis of the work of feminist NGOs (e.g., Bernal and Grewal 2014; de Jong forthcoming).

In the last decade, discussions about the relationship of feminisms and powerful institutions have started to crystallize around the issue of neoliberalism (for an overview see Prügl 2015) and economic reforms. One of the most prominent contributions in this context is Nancy Fraser’s book *Fortunes of feminism* (2013a), alongside two influential framing pieces in the *New Left Review* (2009) and *The Guardian* (2013b). In her book she traces the relative success of certain feminist demands, such as the

incorporation of women in the labor market, which chime well with neoliberal capitalism, and the apparent failure of other claims to make any inroads, under the label of “selective enlistment” (meaning that political, cultural and economic strands of feminist critique got disentangled and then selectively enlisted for the neoliberal cause; see Prügl 2015: 617; Fraser 2009: 99f.; see also Orloff and Schiff 2015). Eisenstein (2015) joins Fraser in arguing that feminist ideals such as women’s right to paid employment are used to justify exploitative working conditions in Export Production Zones (EPZ) in low-wage countries and further criticizes development programs which focus on educating women and girls to lift themselves out of poverty, thereby diverting attention from structural problems such as austerity and unequal trade relations (also Keating, Rasmussen and Rishi 2010; Madhok and Rai 2012).

Focusing on neoliberalism from a cultural studies angle, Angela McRobbie (2009: 1), working within the UK context, speaks of “elements of feminism [having] been taken into account” and “incorporated into political and institutional life,” but also media and popular culture. She builds on her earlier work on post-feminism (McRobbie 2004) to argue that vocabulary such as “empowerment” and “choice” has been “converted into a much more individualistic discourse” (2009: 1) which runs counter to feminist goals. In this way, these elements become a “substitute for feminism” (ibid.) and are instrumentalized to serve anti-feminist purposes. The individualization of subjects, which is part of the neoliberal discourse, has also been criticized in the originally feminist program of gender mainstreaming. Rosi Braidotti (2006: 45, quoted in McRobbie 2009: 159) argues that it is an “anti-feminist mechanism” which “fosters a new sense of isolation among women and hence new forms of vulnerability.”

The relation between popular culture, neoliberalism and ‘difference’ is also discussed in feminist, gender and queer studies work on the commodification of “otherness”, for example bell hooks’ “Eating the Other” (1992) and Jane Ward’s more recent study “Respectably Queer” (2008). By warning against the seduction that commodification holds for marginalized groups searching for recognition, and by underlining that “commodification strips [...] signs of political integrity and meaning, denying the possibility that they can serve as a catalyst for concrete political action,” hooks addresses important dynamics and effects of co-optation (hooks 1992: 33). Ward discusses how the co-optation of “the

language and symbols of queer pride (rainbow flags, coming out discourse [...])” have not only benefitted companies, but also had the effect of “reduc[ing] queer people to quintessential consumers and “private individuals with ‘tastes’” (Ward 2008: 10).

Queer studies have also critically engaged with the selective normalization of LGBT rights, coining the concept of “homonationalism” to describe the appropriation of parts of “gay discourse” in order to exclude racialized and sexualized others (Puar 2007). They also address co-optation in the form of adoption of LGBTQ rights as a benevolent façade that covers hurtful immigration policies (Lal 2013) or military operations under the term “pinkwashing” (Puar 2010; Schulman 2011).<sup>ii</sup> The latter is closely linked with feminist scholarship that has offered a critique of the claim to protect women’s rights to justify military interventions (e.g., Abu-Lughod 2002: 787, using the term “strange bedfellows;” Hunt 2002; Ferguson 2005; von der Lippe and Väyrynen 2011).

While most of these studies also recognize more or less explicitly the complicity of movement actors whose language or ideas get appropriated, others put this argument at the center: One example is Elizabeth Bernstein’s (2010) analysis of some feminists’ active pursuit of political alliances with what seemed unlikely partners such as the Christian right anti-trafficking organizations (also describing them as “strange bedfellows”; see also Flournoy 2013). These are furthering what she calls a “carceral feminism,” a version of feminism which sees tight border policies and a securitized state apparatus as remedies to social problems like trafficking in persons. In the field of feminist political economy other ‘versions of feminism’ have been discussed as the result of new alliances. Adrienne Roberts calls the emerging coalition of financial institutions, states, corporations, the UN and NGOs around the business case for global gender equality the “politico-economic project of ‘transnational business feminism’” (2015: 209), while Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires (2012: 382) propose the concept of “market feminism” to supplement “state feminism” to grasp the contemporary “complexity of [...] feminist engagements with new forms of governance” mediated through the market..

We want to underline with those and other scholars that it is crucial to recognize that there is not an ‘innocent’ state of a concept, program or movement ‘before co-optation’ (e.g., Eschle and Maiguashca

2013; Calkin 2015). Neither could it remain pure since “social justice activists do not operate outside the discursive fields that contour what can be said and what can be heard in different institutional and political arenas” (Naples 2013: 150). Feminism also is a power-infused field, which produces its own inclusions and exclusions (e.g., Bhandar and Ferreira da Silva 2013). Furthermore, it is a contested field: Different political and theoretical traditions, generations and local contexts have produced various perspectives and arguments and sought various alliances (e.g., Schild 2015). All feminist key concepts are subject to internal debates, and often different feminist positions are actually incompatible with one another (Flournoy 2013). This might make certain concepts, such as gender equality, which “allow[s] for multiple conflicting interpretations,” especially vulnerable to co-optation as “a space is created for rhetoric, including empty declarations” (von der Lippe and Väyrynen 2011: 20; on gender mainstreaming see Lombardo and Meier 2006). Clare Hemmings uses the terms “amenability” and “mutual implication” (2011: 11f; also Fraser 2015 on “susceptibility”) referring to the issue of gender equality discourses as tools to strengthen capitalist markets (Hemmings 2011: 12). Both terms are suggestive of a kind of openness of feminisms. At the same time, this begs the question if there are bodies, programs and concepts that are “less easy to co-opt” (Swan and Fox 2010: 585; also Ho 2008).

Such reflections on complicity are taken one step further when introducing conceptions of power that allow also seeing productive effects of forms of implication, perhaps even challenging the very notion of co-optation, as discussed in the interview with Inderpal Grewal in this issue. A Foucauldian conception of power also challenges what Audrey Reeves (2012) describes as binary understandings of co-optation vs. empowerment. Elisabeth Prügl (2011) and Reeves (2012) employ the concept of “governmentality” to analyze the incorporation of feminist knowledge, particularly gender mainstreaming, into various organizations respectively security institutions. Sydney Calkin (2015) argues that simplistic accounts of neoliberal co-optation that maintain a sense of original feminist purity, fail to grasp the bio-political governance of neoliberalism. Such approaches might be useful for comprehending how the mainstreaming of radical approaches has turned them into tools of governance (also Olivius 2014 on gender equality as a tool for global governance; for an example outside feminist research, see Campbell 2011 on peacebuilding



from below). A Gramscian perspective on civil society similarly challenges the idea of co-optation being about the “duping” of activists and instead emphasizes the way in which “corporatization involves the politics of social activists internalizing a belief in the value of corporate responsibility, deregulation, and privatization” as Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron illustrate in their study of the corporatization of activism (2014: 9).

The rich feminist research that we have presented above has mostly put particular issues into focus in order to make an argument about what we collect under the header of co-optation. Its limitation is that the debates often fail to reach beyond their respective areas<sup>iii</sup>. Instead, we want to approach the topic from the reverse by putting the concept of co-optation itself central. This also opens other research avenues: while processes of co-optation have received considerable attention within feminist studies, there is scholarship outside of feminist research, such as social movement research more broadly, which has introduced useful concepts to think about co-optation. Drawing on these other studies, in the next section, we present what we see as learning opportunities for developing a feminist research agenda on co-optation.

### **Looking Further Afield: Co-optation Elsewhere**

This short foray starts by referring to the work on co-optation by Philip Selznick (1949) and William Gamson (1975) and the way in which it has been further developed by other scholars. Selznick, in his study on the Tennessee Valley Authority and its co-optation of grassroots activists, wrote that in order to make sense of his data, he “found it necessary to introduce a concept which, while not new, is somewhat unfamiliar,” namely “coöptation” (1949: 13). Similar to the earlier quoted definition of Ferree and Hess, Selznick’s study focuses on the incorporation of actors and explicitly defines co-optation as “the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability and existence” (1949: 13). Selznick uses the term “blunting” to describe the effect of co-optation, that is, the de-radicalizing, diluting of movement claims which become aligned with dominant institutional requirements (Selznick 1949: 16). This concept has also been

taken up in later work on co-optation (e.g., Cornthassel 2007; Coy 2013) and can be a useful concept for feminist scholars.

Selznick draws a distinction between formal and informal co-optation. The first refers to public, formal and open inclusion of potentially threatening elements into hegemonic organizations – such as the co-optation of indigenous leaders in colonial governance – in order to maintain legitimacy, and the second to a more subtle absorption characterized by the refusal to acknowledge a “capitulation” to pressure, which potentially holds more promise for actual power sharing (1949: 13-15 and 259-261). Sofia Villenas’ autoethnography (1996) demonstrates how the co-optation of persons could go hand in hand with appropriation of otherness, which, as described above, has also been addressed in feminist literature. As a Chicana ethnographer, she was not co-opted on the basis of membership in a social movement or political claims-making, but rather “symbolically co-opted to legitimate academia’s declaration of the postmodern ethnographer as the socially and politically privileged colonizer” (1996: 727). This echoes concerns addressed by Cornel West and bell hooks (1992) in an exchange about the position of radical intellectuals within the emerging academic field of cultural studies. Parallels with gender and queer studies as academic disciplines can easily be drawn here. In this conversation, West, recognizing that the resources that sustain him as an intellectual are directly withheld from marginalized educational institutions, asks how to fight co-optation in this double position of being “progressive and co-opted” (West 1992: 698).

This demonstrates that co-optation’s effect is not limited to cancelling the external threat that the challenging movement poses to the hegemonic system, and thereby stabilizing it. It can also yield new advantages to the dominant actor. Two studies on governance and co-optation, respectively on the Amsterdam squatters’ movement (Uitermark 2004) and the Rastafari movement in Jamaica (King 1999) demonstrate this. In the case of the Rastafari movement, Stephen King describes an “illusion of victory” (1999: 87) to analyze how Rastafarian cultural identity gained recognition in Jamaican politics without the economic restructuring that Rastafarians demanded. By tracing the way in which their cultural heritage was employed to bolster Jamaica’s tourist industry, the study successfully expands co-optation beyond absorption of actors to include social movement symbols. Similarly, Justus Uitermark (2004)

demonstrates how segments of the Amsterdam squatters' movement have facilitated the way the city of Amsterdam can profile itself as a dynamic cultural hub, by offering alternative cultural services.

Another key reference in the field of co-optation, William Gamson, uses the term “new advantages” not to describe the additional benefits for the co-opting party, but considers it in relation to the challenging movement. In two studies (1975; 2006), he includes co-optation as one potential political outcome of movement engagement. Seeking to measure movements' success, he proposes to assess impact with regards to two indicators: first, according to the effect on the status of the movement, “*acceptance*,” and secondly, by reference to the benefits brought about for the movement's proposed beneficiaries, “*new advantages*”. “Co-optation” means “acceptance without new advantages” (2006: 114), while Gamson labels positive outcome on both indicators “acceptance” and “new advantages” “Full Response” and failure on both “Collapse”. That Gamson's work is not a reference point for feminist studies (for an exception see Burke and Bernstein 2014), is perhaps all the more striking given that his study draws on claims-making by the women's movement. Taking as an example the movement's challenge against using the male pronoun ‘he’ as the generic pronoun, he argues that co-optation would indicate media exposure and recognition of feminist claims (i.e., “acceptance”) without the demanded change in the language use (i.e., lack of “new advantages”) (Gamson 2006). Other scholars have argued that acceptance of a movement is the *pre-condition* for co-optation, that is, only once a movement is recognized as a legitimate player, it becomes threatening enough to necessitate co-optation (Trumpy 2008). These reflections on movement's “success” and on “acceptance” can enrich feminist reflections on co-optation, such as Michael Ferguson's (2005) argument that co-optation of women's rights language by the Bush Government is a token of success of the feminist movement.

While Gamson's study is widely cited and his conceptual tools are employed in more recent case studies (King 1999; Coy and Hedeon 2005; Trumpy 2008; Jaffee 2012; Lapegna 2014), other scholars have suggested alternative labels to describe outcomes of social movement interaction with dominant partners. Alexa Trumpy (2008), drawing on Selznick and Gamson, identifies four outcomes, which she calls co-optation, reform, compromise and failure. Reform is the most successful outcome from a

movement perspective, failure the most negative. Co-optation is the outcome where the hegemonic institution “receives credit” for a particular reform (for instance, being more women-friendly) “without altering its actions in any way,” thereby staying in control and in the position to relinquish its relation with the co-opted agent at the point where it is no longer of use (Trumpy 2008: 488). Adil Najam (2000) systematizes the four possible forms of government-NGO relations according to agreement or conflict in relation to *ends* and *means*. “Cooperation” is alignment on both and “confrontation” alignment on neither. “Co-optation” occurs if the strategies of NGO and government align, but their goals do not; an unstable situation where either side of the relation is likely trying to change the other’s aim. “Complementarity” reflects similar goals, but different strategies. Uitermark calls this “complementarity,” “a hybrid form of co-optation”. In his case a segment of the Amsterdam squatters’ movement “retain[ed] their subversive identity” but “bec[a]me part of urban development strategies” (Uitermark 2004: 689). This leads Uitermark to make the fascinating claim that “co-optation in some respects is not necessarily antithetical to radicalism in other respects,” countering the common expectation that it is the moderate elements of a movement which are most susceptible to co-optation (2004: 695). These different typologies of outcomes could be instructive for feminist work on state and corporate partnerships. They can also add depth to existing feminist studies on co-optation; for example, Swan and Fox’s argument that “there are many different shades and forms of co-optation,” such as “compromising, conceding, pacifying or bargaining” (2010: 576).

Case studies on co-optation outside the realm of feminism sometimes share conceptual frameworks with feminist work. For example, Jeff Corntassel (2007), in his study on transnational indigenous rights networks, draws on Margaret Keck’s and Kathryn Sikkink’s (1998) five-part model for assessing transnational network success, which has been an important reference point for work on feminist transnational engagement. He proposes to extend their model with a sixth element, namely co-optation. Co-optation is different from the other five criteria in Keck and Sikkink’s model<sup>iv</sup>, in that it shifts the focus of analysis to the impact on the challenging movement, rather than on the hegemonic institution. It describes what Corntassel witnessed during the first UN Indigenous Decade: the extension of limited

forms of political participation to indigenous leaders within UN governance structures, without yielding positive change for indigenous peoples, instead reinforcing UN's and nation-states' agendas. In order to understand this "illusion of inclusion," Corntassel adds to the aforementioned mechanism of "blunting" the process of "channeling". This describes the way in which the invitation to participate in formal governance structures leads the movement's energies to be redirected, away from external grassroots mobilization (Corntassel 2005: 140; also Uitermark 2004: 691). Again, the comparison that Corntassel draws between the Decade for Women and the Indigenous Decade, as well as his reference to the relation between co-optation and the UN's mainstreaming agenda, present ample opportunity of connecting nodes with feminist studies on co-optation.

The dilemmas of partnership or entering structures of governance described by Corntassel can be captured with the term "collaboration," which carries both positive and negative connotations of movement cooperation with or inclusion in (participatory structures of) dominant institutions. As Patrick Coy and Timothy Hedeem observe, collaboration is often necessary for movements to achieve social change, while it remains "a difficult and delicate task" to assess whether it aids long-term goals (2005: 417). Similarly, Najam points out that the distinction between "catalyzing," a term with a positive connotation describing NGOs' push for change and "co-optation" with its negative connotation of governments' efforts to influence NGOs, is in fact "often fuzzy" (2000: 388). Pursuing this line of analysis could further be productive in unpacking the links as well as differences between co-optation and complicity, two terms that have frequently emerged together, also in feminist literature (Villenas 1996; Swan and Fox 2010; Kantola and Squires 2012).

The partnerships entered by movements have now extended from solely the political to the corporate sphere (as also signaled by feminist scholars). This reflects the fact that social movements have recognized the weakening of governance structures and the increased power of companies to affect social change. Case studies on fair trade (Jaffee 2012) and Greenpeace (Trumpy 2008), for instance, have demonstrated that movements have redirected their mobilization efforts and identified industry structures rather than political opportunity structures. Jaffee extends Gamson's work to the corporate realm by

attributing the co-optation of parts of the fair trade movement in “prioritizing access over new advantages – or by ‘redefining new advantages’ as merely increase in sales” (Jaffee 2012: 111). This does not mean that all corporate co-optation emerges as the result of movement active approaching of corporate actors. For example, Eva Maria Hinterhuber and Simon Möller (2013) describe the ways in which innovative and unconventional forms of political expression that emerge in civil society as a challenge to conventional modes, are copied, commercialized, and subsequently co-opted by companies. Not only do these provide companies with new means of communication, but because these forms now get identified with the commercial actors and their goals, they also weaken their power as alternative expressions of radical political claims. Their analysis can be usefully applied to Karl Lagerfeld’s 2014 Paris catwalk show for Chanel in which the designer staged a women’s movement protest march, carrying placards with slogans such as “Feminist but Feminine” and “Make Fashion not War” (Coslett 2014).

Another key lesson that can be drawn from Jaffee’s study on the co-optation of the fair trade movement, is that co-optation is not an event, but a process. Tracing the dilution of fair trade standards alongside increased interaction with corporations, Jaffee warns that what at first sight might look like a movement internal struggle over strategies “may instead be the actual process of co-optation unfolding” (ibid.: 112). While feminist studies so far are largely lacking a careful mapping of the stages of co-optation, two key studies outside gender and queer studies have attempted to do exactly that. The first important contribution in conceptualizing different stages of the co-optation process, which is unique for its detail, is Coy and Hedeem’s (2005) four-stage model. To illustrate it they use the case of the co-optation of the US community mediation movement by the state legal system. A schematic overview of this stage model taken from Coy and Hedeem’s original publication is presented below:

[Figure 1 here]

The first stage, “Inception,” includes the formation of the challenging movement with its demands for change, possibly, the introduction of alternative models, and the recognition from the side of the state and other vested interests that reform is needed. “Appropriation of Language, Technique” and “Appropriation via Inclusion, Participation” together constitute Stage Two. The appropriation of terminology does not stop at the adoption of radical vocabulary, but goes as far as employing it for different aims, and redefining its meaning in ways that run counter to its original intention. Coy and Hedeem explain “Appropriation via inclusion” by reference to the earlier referenced concept of channeling. According to them, channeling is combined with the inclusion of movement actors in decision-making bodies with responsibility but without substantive power, and with “salience control,” a development where the movement reorganizes its priorities in the conviction that certain demands have already been met (Coy and Hedeem 2005: 417f.). Stage Three similarly comprises two interlinked moves; 3a consists of setting up reform programs inside the hegemonic institution and assimilating movement actors into these new programs. 3b is the “transformation of program goals” for example through efficiency measures and state-licensed accreditation of staff (Coy and Hedeem 2005: 423). Finally, this culminates in Stage Four when the state and vested interests take power of regulation, in this case, over the practice of mediation. Within that same Stage Four, Cory and Hedeem identify what they call “protective responses” by the original challenging movement to maintain some of its integrity (Coy and Hedeem 2005: 426).

While Coy and Hedeem’s schematic overview communicates a seemingly progressive and linear development of co-optation, they have pointed out that their model should be understood as including loop-backs and different temporalities. It does not require much imagination to map elements of Coy and Hedeem’s model onto the different feminist concerns with co-optation, as described in the previous section and beyond; from the hollowing out of concepts such as “gender,” to the incorporation of femocrats in gender state machinery as well as the employment of diversity management to increase a company’s profit. Coy and Hedeem’s expressed hope that their model is useful for other contexts, can be an invitation for feminist scholars to apply it to new case studies. This would help to further evaluate whether the model

warrants wider applicability, what its merits are, what it might conceal and in what ways it might need to be revised.

Trumpy's detailed analysis of Greenpeace's international campaign against Coca-Cola's refrigerator use offers the second main attempt to capture the process rather than the event of co-optation. She employs qualitative Event Structure Analysis to identify which steps lead to any of the four possible outcomes that she labelled co-optation, corporate reform, compromise and failure (Trumpy 2008: 486). The merit of this approach is that by drawing causal links between events, it is possible to map not only the outcome, but also attempted and deflected co-optation (Trumpy 2008). She combines this with frame alignment process theory (Snow et al. 1986) based on the hypothesis that Greenpeace uses diagnostic and prognostic framing when approaching Coca-Cola, and that Coca-Cola reacts to and redefines these. Translated to co-optation, this means that "co-optation occurs if: (1) the prognostic frames of Greenpeace and Coca-Cola align (i.e., they agree on the remedy for the problem, such as the need for reduction of toxic refrigerators), (2) Coca-Cola does not support its framing with action, and (3) Greenpeace ignores this discrepancy" (Trumpy 2008: 488). In this way, Coca-Cola is able to keep the support of Greenpeace, or Starbucks the accreditation of the fair trade movement (Jaffee 2012), or, to bring it back to feminist studies, neoliberalism "the aura of emancipation" (Fraser 2015) without conceding to movement demands. Trumpy's study is one of the most explicit and impressive attempts to develop a methodology for studying co-optation.

Feminist studies can draw on this use of event and frame analysis as methods for studying co-optation and further innovate these methods. An example of what this could look like is Mary Burke and Mary Bernstein's study on queer frame co-optation by conservative LGBT rights opponents in Vermont. Their publication constitutes an exceptional example by drawing on the broader scholarship on co-optation, such as Trumpy, Gamson, Coy and Hedeem and Jaffee. Considering movement frames as an object of co-optation, they define co-optation as "a process where opponents adopt aspects of the *content* of a movement's discourse, while subverting its *intent*" (2014: 831). In their case, as they argue, conservative forces advocated in favor of a form of recognition of 'reciprocal beneficiary relationships,'



not because they supported the queer intent behind widening the range of recognized relationships, but to undermine claims for gay marriage (Burke and Bernstein 2014). Similar to Trumpy's, the value of their study is that they present their methods, their coding and findings in a comprehensive manner that invites reflection on the research design of studies of co-optation.

### **Co-optation: A Research Agenda**

The above synthesis of disparate work on co-optation within feminist, gender and queer studies, as well as the excursion into the wider field of studies on co-optation, while not providing any firm answers, offers at least three elements that can form the basis for a feminist research agenda on co-optation.

First, it shows what can be gained from placing co-optation at the center of analysis and reveals that understanding co-optation requires consideration of a broad range of elements. In the table below we have made a preliminary attempt to structure these elements in the form of analytical **guiding questions**. These analytical guiding questions can be used for analyzing any particular case of possible co-optation or for case comparison and support a more structured approach to mapping, for instance, the relevant *actors*, the *conditions* under which co-optation takes place, its *effects*, and the subsequent *responses*. Second, the research agenda should invite discussion on a **conceptual toolkit**, which will aid in answering the analytical guiding questions and more precisely describing the process of co-optation. This means both developing new concepts and refining existing ones (introduced in the previous sections), such as amenability; blunting; channeling; acceptance; illusion of inclusion. Third, there is a need to develop **methodologies** as the previous section has concluded. This includes considering which methods are particularly appropriate for what type of co-optation and which methods are needed to answer which analytical questions.

**Table 1. Analytical guiding questions.**

DEFINITIONS	How can we define co-optation? When can co-optation be said to have been achieved or have failed? Is it absolute or can it be partial?
OBJECTS	What exactly is being co-opted? Discourses, actors, concepts, frames, symbols, methods, strategies?
ACTORS	By whom? What kind actors (i.e., political or commercial)? What is the role of the co-opted actor in the process of co-optation? Are there third parties involved?
CONDITIONS	What are the preconditions for co-optation? What prompts co-optation? What makes it succeed or fail?
MECHANISMS	What are the mechanisms of co-optation? What are common or divergent mechanisms of co-optation between disparate fields? What are the stages of co-optation?
AIMS	For which purpose? What is the relation to the "original" aim (contra, diverting)?
EFFECTS	What are the effects of co-optation on the co-opted/co-opting element? What is gained/lost? What is (re-)produced?
INTENTIONS	What is the role of intention, deliberation or happenstance in the co-optation process?
OPENNESS	What leaves the object of co-optation vulnerable to, open to or complicit with its co-optation? What is not or cannot be co-opted? What is left out?
RESPONSES	What are the responses to co-optation? How can co-optation be averted or resisted?

The articles in this thematic section offer some preliminary engagement with some of the questions in the table above. As the title of her contribution already suggests, Anna Korteweg's article "The 'What and 'Who' of Co-optation: Gendered Racialized Migrations, Settler Nation-States and Post-Colonial Difference," draws a distinction between what and who is co-opted both for analytical and political purposes against tendencies to collapse the two. This perspective allows her to analyze co-optation in relation to the speaking positions of two Muslim women in the Ontario (Canada) Sharia-based arbitration debate in ways that avoid the trap of seeing them as either co-opted or agentic. She brings the 'what' and the 'who' together by not only treating the 'what' as something that can never be pure, but similarly the 'who', insisting that there is no initial pure liberated subject. Korteweg redefines co-optation as "the moments of political engagement in which attempts to further liberation turn into illiberal

practices” and thereby shifts the focus from avoiding contamination by political engagement to trying to understand at what moments engagement fosters liberation and in which instances oppression.

Suzanne Clisby and Athena Enderstein engage with one of the key issues in feminist discussions on co-optation: gender mainstreaming. Highlighting that gender equality discourses are cultural products that can be appropriated, they insert ‘cultural appropriation’ into their analytical framework of co-optation. They conceptualize co-optation as a process of de-politicization, resignification and re-politicization and analyze the mechanisms of this process in the negotiation of Occidental and Orientalist discourses. Angelika Striedinger, in her contribution ‘How organizational research can avoid the pitfalls of a co-optation perspective: Analyzing gender equality work in Austrian universities with organizational institutionalism’, in the spirit of some of the studies discussed above (such as Prügler 2011) offers a necessary cautionary note about the dangers of applying a reductive co-optation lens. She traces back how the concept of co-optation was instructive in her own research to analyze the way gender equality was discussed and legitimized in the context of managerial university reform in Austria, but on further reflection appeared limited in understanding the reflective capacities of gender equality agents, as well as the new opportunities that arose. She proposes to complement co-optation with concepts inspired by organizational institutionalism, in order to build a more nuanced account of processes of institutional change and development.

Two pieces in the Conversations section of this issue further engage with the concept of co-optation: Wendy Harcourt’s reflections on the ambiguities of feminists, like her, working inside the development field and Srila Roy’s interview with Inderpal Grewal about the relation between intersectionality and co-optation.

The complexity of processes of co-optation and the different dimensions that need to be considered require “collective research, since no single case can attend to all of these dimensions and processes” (Naples 2013: 151) and as is evident from the synthesis of the rich existing work. Together, the articles of this dialogue section seek to inspire feminist scholarship to explore the analytical and political gains of a focused research agenda on co-optation.

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<sup>i</sup> Note that the vocabulary used by different authors to describe the co-opted versions of feminisms display some remarkable similarity: “faux-feminism,” “guise,” (McRobbie 2009, 1) “shadowy version,” (Fraser 2009, 114) “appears to be one’s own” (Stratigaki 2004, 36).

ii In the environmental movement, the concept of “greenwash(ing)” is used to critique marketing strategies that mask the negative environmental impact of corporate practices (e.g., Karliner 2001).

iii One exception might be Fraser’s argument which has garnered a lot of attention and critical discussion (e.g., Bhandar and Ferreira da Silva 2013; Eschle and Maiguashca 2013; Schild 2015).

iv According to Keck and Sikkink, the five criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of transnational action networks are: 1. Issue creation and agenda setting; 2. Influence on discursive positions of states and international organizations; 3. Influence on institutional procedures; 4. Influence on policy change in “target actors;” and 5. Influence on state behavior (1998: 25).

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