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# ESSAY

Invited article

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## ACADEMIC UNFREEDOM

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Judith Butler (2021), writing in the international version of *The Guardian*, states that

the term “gender” attracts, condenses, and electrifies a diverse set of social and economic anxieties produced by increasing economic precarity under neoliberal regimes, intensifying social inequality, and pandemic shutdown.

Butler argues that various countries, including Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Turkey in Europe, and Brazil in South America (one may add England, France, and Italy) have adopted increasingly nationalistic, homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic policies under the guise of opposing ‘gender ideology’ that attack, misrepresent, and silence university departments and academics who teach gender studies, and marginalized people made vulnerable due to their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, migrant status, poverty, and so on. Butler herself was subjected to such silencing in Brazil in 2018 when fascists burned an effigy of her to prevent her from speaking at an academic conference (Butler, 2021), and when the UK print edition of the national newspaper *The Guardian* had an interview with her expunged from the international edition earlier this year (Haug, 2021). These attacks on those who teach and research gender studies are political and ideological attacks on ‘academic freedom’ in increasingly authoritarian and fascist countries.

I work for a university in the UK where the ‘hot button’ issues in recent years have been ‘academic freedom’ and ‘free speech’ at a time when the country is beset by increasing social inequality, Covid-19 and Brexit, and impacted by global warming. More precisely, the putative ‘academic freedoms’ demanded in the national press and by Conservative politicians have coalesced around a support for those who demand their right to voice, for instance, racist, or transphobic opinions free from criticism, whilst denying similar ‘freedoms’ to others. Academia, at least in the UK, is no longer the dreaming spires distanced from the general public, but places where we are expected to ‘reach out’ and influence public understanding and politics. Those demanding their ‘academic freedom’ do so in the national media, addressing not just the public

but politicians and lawmakers: HEIs are not the 'total institutions' described by Goffman, but porous, influenced by, and influencing others (McClellan, 2021).

During the week commencing October 10, 2021 the UK national press first reported that Professor Kathleen Stock had been attacked on campus for her 'gender critical' (some would say transphobic) views, and a few days later that she had left her post for her own safety (Adams, 2021). The transphobia that Stock is accused of is not an isolated, small thing, but is instead so widespread that the UK media published 6400 articles about trans people in the period 2017-2019, most of which were negative about transgender people (Baker, 2019; see also Serrano, 2017). To provide a sense of the scale of the issue, 1% of the UK population of 67 million people are thought to be transgender. The mass media in this instance does not merely report the news, but manufactures it and has a vested interest in repeatedly platforming Stock as an academic to buttress their often odious position with a veneer of academic credibility. There were 43 English language articles on major news platforms supporting Stock's 'academic freedom' to attack transgender people published between June 6, 2018 – July 28, 2021 (<https://kathleenstock.com/in-the-press/>). National TV and BBC radio in the UK have provided her with a platform ten times since July 2018 (<https://kathleenstock.com/tv-and-radio-appearances/>) to promote her opinion. This is not an academic who has been silenced and denied their freedom to speak.

The attacks against Stock in October appear to have comprised a small demonstration by ten students, who also glued some A4 pieces of paper demanding that she be dismissed and also wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of that university to demand the same – hardly the stuff of the Paris student uprising in the 1960s, or student demonstrations against racism and the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s in the USA: or even the 200 strong student sit-in that I attended as an undergraduate when the bar increased the price of a pint of lager in the 1980s. In some respects what was surprising was not the intensity of the attacks, but that they had happened at all in a student populace that has been increasingly politically passive in recent years: the neo-liberalism of higher education has had students focus on instrumental concerns about their future career aspirations, where a history of militancy does not speak of being a compliant 'team player'.

Serendipitously two other academic stories went largely unnoticed and little commented on in the same week, yet both speak to 'academic freedom'. Professor David Miller was dismissed from his tenured position accused of antisemitism, an accusation that an investigation had found him innocent of (Hall, 2021); Professor Priyamvada Gopal's invitation to address staff at the Home Office was canceled seemingly by the Government after the intervention of a far-right-wing group (Gopal, 2021). Unlike Stock, who is a professor of philosophical aesthetics, not gender, both Miller and Gopal are renowned academics, but both were denied the 'freedom' of their specialist, academic areas.

What binds these three stories together is the idea of 'academic freedom'; what drives them apart is that only one of these three professors, Kathleen Stock, has received the public support of their university Vice-Chancellor, national press, and politicians. Stock has received

numerous column inches voicing support, while Miller and Gopal are hardly mentioned, let alone supported. It seems that 'academic freedom', or what passes for it, is partisan and applies only to those aligned with an increasingly neo-liberal globalism, beloved by ex-President Trump, Prime Minister Johnson, President Bolsonaro, President Putin, Prime Minister Modi, and others. It is buttressed by an increasingly neo-liberal press that, whilst demanding 'free speech', creates vapid articles attacking 'woke' students and academics, and simultaneously silences those very 'woke' students and academics (Haug, 2021. See <https://michaelhobbes.substack.com/p/moral-panic-journalism-for-a-discussion>).

In this maelstrom of concerns for 'academic freedom' and 'free speech' on campus, there are other stories that have generally remained unreported by the mass media platforms that attack 'woke'. Students at Stock's university have been silenced by that university when they have reported that they have been harassed (<https://twitter.com/graceelavery/status/1450508397820981250>). It is a university that has a history of failures in dealing with the sexual abuse of students (Tobin, 2021). The failure of universities to protect female and gender and sexual minority students and staff from harassment, abuse, and violence, however, is not limited to Stock's employer, but is more widespread and endemic of the sexual violence of patriarchal, racist, and elitist systems within neoliberal universities (Srinivasan, 2021). Even when a university ostensibly takes action to investigate, it may build walls to block that investigation (Ahmed, 2017).

In increasingly neo-liberal 'universities', 'academic freedom' has become a label that describes how vulnerable students and staff are required to protect the fragile public image of an institution that has failed in its duty of care towards them. It is a label used to silence vulnerable minorities whilst protecting an institutional elite from criticism. 'Academic freedom' is a nebulous concept that, for those who advocate for neo-liberalism, means something very different from what is generally conceived in academia.

## ACADEMIC UNFREEDOM

Academic freedom in the UK is generally taken to mean that we have the freedom to conduct research, to disseminate that research, and to teach the subjects we specialize in, largely free from interference. I say 'largely free' as our freedoms are restricted by the need to find funding for empirical research and to abide by the requirements of the funding body, our institutions, and our academic peers and colleagues. Freedom is impacted increasingly by the demands of a government and industry that demand that universities 'produce' employable graduates, and increasingly subject to the opinion of journalists and the general public. This limited 'academic freedom' presumes that we speak and practice from a position where we have an academic authority that is based on our advanced understanding of a subject, and is judged by our peers.

Grace Lavery (2021) provides a very useful and relatively short critical discussion of what 'academic freedom' is, and how it differs from 'free speech' and personal opinion. In doing so

Lavery makes clear how Stock fails the requirements of ‘academic freedom’, and instead presents, at best, ‘free speech’, and quite likely a mere personal opinion. Stock’s opinion of transgender women is not supported by ‘academic freedom’, her opinion is not based on empirical research, and she has not subjected her work to peer review by academics who specialize in gender studies. She has instead chosen to publish her work in journalistic outlets including *Quillette*, an outlet described as ‘right leaning’, ‘anti-feminist’, and which has repeated racist tropes and is of ‘low credibility’ (<https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/quillette/>). (She has published in *Quillette* twice, and had three articles published by that platform supporting her disparagement of trans people whom she likens to an ‘ideology’. She has also published on the online UK platform, *Spiked*, which is owned by the Charles Koch Foundation, a platform described as ‘fueling the hard right’ (Monbiot, 2018).) These qualities are similar to many of those for whom a neo-liberal press demands ‘academic freedom’, whilst attacking the academic freedom of academics like Miller and Gopal for speaking on an academic subject about which they have academic credibility. To claim a right to freedom for some whilst denying it to others is not freedom; this is a partisan academic unfreedom.

## THE ‘NEW’ WORLD ORDER

Judith Butler (2021) discusses how an

anti-gender ideology movement crosses borders, linking organizations in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and east Asia. The opposition to “gender” is voiced by governments as diverse as Macron’s France and Duda’s Poland, circulating in rightwing parties in Italy, and showing up on major electoral platforms in Costa Rica and Colombia

This partisanship does not attend to simple notions of ‘left’ and ‘right’, but of the maintenance of global elites that transcend the Global North and Global South and national borders in a post-capitalist world, mapped through the flow of money and the homosociality of their networks, which maintain powerful coalitions built on political and religious ideology.

Unpicking these networks and identifying the flows of power, money and (political) influence is beyond the scope of this article; indeed, it would be the stuff of a major, multi-institutional, longitudinal study. I instead focus only on (some) of the homosocial networking of transphobic individuals and groups in the Global North, and particularly in the UK and USA.

In England, ‘gender critical’ people pursue this in public and are platformed by a national press that is hostile to trans rights (Kathleen Stock for instance has written for, and has had numerous articles supporting her ‘gender critical’ views in *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Spectator*, and *The Guardian*, along with far-right outlets including *Quillette* and *Spiked*), in parliament through lobbying groups, and in the legal system by taking legal action against organizations and individuals whom they consider support ‘transgenderism’. In

2021, 'gender critical' people paid over £300,000 to just one barrister for legal services, either to defend transphobic speech as 'free speech', or to attempt to restrict the legal rights of trans people. Funding for these legal services was amassed quickly on social media through 'crowd funding', making it impossible to identify the actual source of donations, many of which are 'anonymous'.

The European Parliamentary Forum (EPF, 2021) identified hundreds of millions of Euros of funding from an international network of neo-liberals and religious fundamentalists, journalists, politicians, ultraorthodox religious groups, and the far right. Perreau (2016) and Villa (2017) have written of the connections between anti-LGBT gender critical feminists, extreme religious groups, and the far right in Europe, which Villa termed *anti-genderismus* (see also Redecker, 2016). This money, which is often siphoned in through 'dark web' networks, has been used to establish and support a network of 'gender critical' groups throughout Europe, including the UK, and funds their activities, which are not restricted to transphobia, but also include homophobic attacks on equal sex marriage, body autonomy and abortion rights and anti-sex worker fundamentalism. 'Gender critical' groups in the UK and Europe have been linked to white supremacist and ultra-orthodox Christian groups in the United States and Eastern Europe, and the '*anti-genderismus*' movement, which originated in the Vatican and spawned the 'gender critical' movement, has been taken up and popularized by neo-Nazis (Redecker, 2016).

To conclude, the concept of 'academic freedom' grounded in a freedom to research and teach subjects in which we are specialists and of which we have academic knowledge, is a freedom that I fully support. It is a freedom that is increasingly denied to the discipline of Gender Studies. The very concept of 'academic freedom' has been grossly distorted by powerful elites in neoliberal states across the world to further totalitarianism and to attack vulnerable minorities. This is not academic freedom, but an academic unfreedom for anyone who is not a fascist.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Saoirse O'Shea worked on the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach, theoretical review, writing and final revision of the manuscript.