

Snowflakes, Pseudo Science, Grievance Studies? Situating Critical Scholarship and Progressive Politics in the Context of Far-Right Ascendancy

Interviews with Akanksha Mehta, Gurminder K. Bhambra, and Alison Phipps

Interview 3/3: Alison Phipps

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Progressive politics and critical scholarship are under attack. While this is neither new nor unusual, these attacks have reached a new pitch and intensity in the current context of the global rise of the (far) right. They target individual scholars, as seen in the public hounding of Judith Butler and Kimberlé Crenshaw, purge degree programmes from universities, as witnessed by the exiling of the Gender Studies MA from the Central European University, and seek to humiliate entire branches of scholarship by decrying them as ‘constructivist sophistry’, as the ‘Grievance Studies’ hoax article has done.

The charge raised against this scholarship – usually in gender, queer, post-colonial, and critical race studies – is that it is not ‘proper’ science. According to its critics, it lacks objectivity and rigour, fails to produce independently verifiable results, uses incomprehensible jargon, and is ultimately rooted in the subjective political commitments of its authors instead of ‘simply’ researching and theorizing social and political reality ‘out there’.

This espousal of positivist principles of ‘proper’ science can also be found in reactionary scholarly efforts to re-appraise Empire. Prominent examples of this approach include the ‘Ethics and Empire’ project at Oxford University, as well as a 2018 article in *Third World Quarterly*. Both stake the validity of their undertaking on the objectivity of their approach and the universality of their methods, which proceed by ‘test[ing] the critiques against the historical facts of empire’ (Ethics and Empire) and using ‘simple epistemic virtues’ to conduct an ‘objective cost/benefit analysis’ of colonialism (TWQ).

What are the politics of knowledge at work in these confrontations? How should progressive, critical scholarship respond to charges of lack of scientific integrity and rigour? What kinds of politics of knowledge are necessary to produce scholarship that is both valid and emancipatory? I conducted interviews with three scholars in gender, critical race, and post-colonial studies who are actively involved in movements to decolonize the university and end sexual violence on campus: Dr Akanksha Mehta (Lecturer in Gender, Sexuality, and Cultural Studies and co-director of the Centre for Feminist Research at Goldsmiths), Prof Gurminder K. Bhambra (Professor of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies at the University of Sussex), and Prof Alison Phipps (Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Sussex). The interviews were conducted separately in April 2019, and appear here in the order in which they took place.

This interview with Alison Phipps is the third of three interviews. The other interviews in this series can be found on the Sentio website.

L: I’d like to start by talking about the politics of knowledge in a number of recent struggles in and outside of academia. These have included both efforts to re-situate empire as a worthy, ethical project, but also anti-trans activism. I wonder whether we could call their approach a kind of ‘brute positivism’, where claims are deemed valid because they’re supposedly common-sensical, and where arguments are called ‘better’ because they gesture towards certain indisputable facts, like anatomy or a

historical record. Would you agree? Is this politics of knowledge a common thread we see in right-wing, conservative scholarship and activism?

AP: I think so, and I think that probably gender studies and critical race studies are the canary in the coal mine. The hoax on gender studies and critical race journals mentioned a number of other disciplines as well – I think sociology, anthropology, there may have been others. So I think it's an attack on all of the humanities, some of the social sciences, but obviously they're trying to pick off what they see as the weak links first.

L: Could you talk in more depth about what it is about these disciplines that is identified as weak?

AP: I think it's a couple of things. First of all, I think it's the identity politics trope, which acts as a cipher for people who think that equality's gotten out of hand, or within the more academic attacks, or those attacks masquerading as more respectable, is packaged up in opposition to what they see as an obsession with difference, which threatens the ideals of the enlightenment. So someone like Jordan Peterson calls himself an enlightenment liberal, who is just opposed to identity politics because it's too particularistic.

The second thing is the grievance studies thing, the idea that we're all focusing too much on our wounds, we're all whingeing about our oppressions all the time. I think what that has done, which is a shame, is repackage a lot of valid feminist discussions around the politics of the wound. I'm thinking about Wendy Brown's *States of Injury*, for example, which I think is a fantastic text which explores some of the drawbacks of having a politics which is wound-focused. I actually think what Wendy Brown is critiquing primarily is white feminism, which she doesn't acknowledge, but for me her critique, when applied to white feminism, is valid. But especially in the backlash against campus activism against sexual violence in the US, critiques like Brown's were repackaged into an accusation that victimization and trauma was made up.

And there's been also a rejection of postmodernism in various different ways, with the idea that postmodernism is anti-science and anti-reality, or the source of 'gender ideology', which means feminists, LGBT or specifically trans people, depending on the context. The religious right have been targeting postmodernism for a long time. And the alt-right hate postmodernism, even though they don't really understand what it is. So I think all of that has come together and put gender studies in the crosshairs, and critical race studies and queer studies as well. The word queer has become a particular target of both the right and anti-trans feminists, because they associate it with postmodern identity politics.

L: I'm interested in what you said about this theme of the enlightenment liberal that crops up in these debates. It seems to me like a clawing back of the narrative of progress, where the left have had that mantle for a few decades, and now we're witnessing a countermove from the right.

AP: Yes, exactly. And they call us the 'regressive left' or the 'oppressive left'. Anti-trans feminist Julie Bindel uses the phrase 'the trans Taliban', which is a very clear position-taking that is incredibly problematic in lots of different ways. I think that's particularly been a characteristic of some elements of the alt-right (the ones defined as 'alt-lite') – not wanting to be defined as conservative or reactionary. Instead they're saying, 'we know the way forward, and that way is universality, enlightenment ideals, progress, democracy – not identity'. Anti-trans feminists use a similar strategy. It's very clever, in some ways – it's probably exactly the right thing to do.

L: I also wanted to discuss with you a number of attacks on gender studies scholars and scholarship – for instance, the vilification and personal attacks on Judith Butler and Kimberlé Crenshaw, as well as that 'Grievance Studies' hoax article. Why are these things happening now? This scholarship and the antipathy towards it are not new, but it's reached a new pitch.

AP: It has, and I think it's been made possible by the global swing to the right. The Internet also has a role to play – the alt-right have had massive success on online and social media, which has created more spaces for these types of things to appear! So there is a definite audience and market for these types of views. It's also very telling that anti-trans feminists are most often platformed by right and far-right publications like *Spiked*, the *Spectator*, and *Quillette*.

That being said, the write up of that ‘Grievance Studies’ article was very misleading because a number of their attempted publications were rejected. But also going back to your questions about knowledge, a number of the articles were actually defined as hoaxes because they rested on different assumptions about what counted as knowledge – knowledge that we in gender studies would find perfectly acceptable. So the idea that you could go to Hooters and explore the social construction of masculinity through the behaviour of the men in that bar is actually something we would do! But because they come from this, what did you call it – ‘brute positivist’ – place [changes voice] where men just like to look at tits! It’s no more complicated than that, everybody knows that! It’s common sense! [voice returns to normal] Because they were coming from that place, the article seemed ridiculous, but that premise is not ridiculous to me. And they had also studied so hard to develop these hoaxes that in some cases they produced articles that were actually half decent.

L: The charges brought against gender studies by the right are two-fold: On the one hand, it’s called frivolous and discredited as science. On the other, it’s positioned as dangerous and powerful, capable of destroying the family and corrupting your children. What’s your assessment of the first claim, and how does feminist theorizing accrue this power?

AP: It’s not frivolous! There’s a huge body of feminist epistemology and theory around the problems of the idea of objectivity. All perspectives are partial, it’s just that the perspectives of the dominant group become universal, become factual, become true. And that’s not just in feminism, that’s in Foucault and a lot of postmodern thinkers. It’s not new and it’s not even particularly revolutionary any more – many scholars in the humanities and social sciences operate with these assumptions, and some in the natural sciences as well. We are dealing with very clear fascist tropes here – defining your enemies as both weak and strong at the same time, and obsessing about plots and conspiracies. This is compounded by misogyny, queerphobia and transphobia, because gender studies is mostly done by women and LGBT people. It’s ‘girls’ things’, or it’s all about sex or feelings or experiences, which can’t constitute real knowledge. I think that’s a problem for other social sciences and humanities subjects as well, because people both dismiss expertise on ‘personal issues’ and simultaneously also think they have it. And to some extent they’re right – we are all experts on our own experience. So to validate experience as knowledge is both necessary and dangerous, because it means that people can play their experiences as intellectual capital in whatever way they want. So if we don’t have other criteria for evaluating knowledge, that becomes quite dangerous.

The right does this all the time. There’s been any number of privileged white men saying, ‘I feel threatened!’ Piers Morgan, for example. That’s an experiential knowledge claim. But of course they don’t acknowledge it as that, and because of their dominant social position, it just becomes accepted as fact. So it’s not frivolous – what gender studies scholarship is saying is effectively common sense. Everybody uses experience as a form of knowledge-making, but we get the blame for it when people want to dismiss ‘the feels’.

The idea of gender studies as all-powerful is partly about white men’s fear, which is elevated at a time when white fear is centre stage. The fear that women are taking over, that entitlements are being threatened, because deep down, privileged white men know that their entitlements are not god-given gifts – they’re things that they don’t deserve. So that can be very frightening. With MeToo, the idea that sexual harassment might suddenly be called out is deeply threatening, because most men have probably done something in that area that they’re not proud of. That doesn’t mean they should all be locked up – that doesn’t mean they should all lose their jobs. But being in a position of privilege makes you hyper-alert to threat. And the monstrosity of feminism is part of the backlash. Women have taken over... I mean, who? How have we taken over? The world is still run by men. There are other fears at play as well, which very often involve privileged white women – the fear of intersectionality, which seems to be a fear that feminism will be overrun by queers and trans people, and which expresses colonial values. The tropes of ‘female erasure’, ‘male obsolescence’, and ‘white genocide’ are quite similar in their origins and make-up.

L: What should our response to these charges be? Should we double down on fact and objectivity [Alison interjects: ‘No!’], or do we reject the terms of the debate?

AP: I don’t know exactly what the response is. I don’t think we need to double down and say actually we are objective, because we’re not! I think we definitely reject the terms of the debate – or any debate at all – with fascists. ‘Reasonable debate’ is not a way to counter unreasonable and dangerous ideas, it’s a way to give them

oxygen. And we've seen that happen – as the mainstream media have platformed far-right figures, their politics have become more acceptable and gained more power. In terms of the more 'respectable' figures involved in this, they often don't act in good faith, so debate becomes extremely difficult. Anti-trans feminists, for example, tend to change their claims depending on what part of the argument they want to win. So sometimes trans women are too feminine and are shoring up oppressive norms. Other times they're too masculine which means they are perverts and sexual predators. And the 'alt-lite' don't seem to believe half of what they say, it's all a big game. So debating with them would be like trying to hit a moving target.

There is perhaps work to be done with people who might be convinced or not convinced, depending on how much information they have and are given. Especially with younger people, and that is where we as academics are in a good position, to be able to raise these questions with students about the nature of knowledge, and what counts as valid knowledge. Also to educate them on how to think for themselves in a 'post-truth' context where the claim and counter-claim has reached new heights. I think that can be done in all disciplines, not just ones that have a methodological focus.

L: As a university professor you're speaking with students all the time.

AP: Yes exactly, and I would certainly engage with students who express these views in my classes, and other students would do that as well. But it's a very contested, dangerous field at the moment, because you can be accused of indoctrination very easily as a university lecturer. I've been accused of being too political, of trying to indoctrinate students into my views, even though I'm very careful to reassure students that they can disagree with me. The Overton window has shifted, so just speaking in a left-wing register has become oppressive and censorious and indoctrinatory. I think it's useful to present students with examples and data, for instance about equal pay, or universal credit, or the hostile environment, or trans healthcare. This doesn't have to be done with strong claims to 'objectivity', but students can be encouraged to evaluate different sources and make up their own minds. Because we're in an era of post-truth where people can make up facts to suit themselves, and broadcast them very loudly to a very large audience, perhaps the best thing to do is to give people the capacity to think for themselves. So not just to say 'you're wrong', but explore the bases on which claims are being made.

L: In your recent article 'The Fight Against Sexual Violence', you discuss how a lot of feminist organizing is compromised by a stance of 'political whiteness', where both injury and redress are only seen in a context of affluent whiteness. Can you talk about the requirements for a progressive politics of knowledge and struggle? What do we do specifically, in our scholarship and activism, to counter that stance?

AP: I think an obvious way to counter what I call political whiteness is to make sure women and non-binary people of colour are at the forefront of our movements, to make sure that we're reading their scholarship and other writings. We need to take our lead from people who have been doing this kind of alternative politics for a long time, because they understand the nuances and complexities. The prison abolition movement in the US especially is a really good example of this. Black feminists have been working for a long time in that movement, in the spaces between sexual and domestic violence and state violence. This is where we all need to be.

There is also what Mariame Kaba calls the 'jailbreak of the imagination', which is about imagining the kind of society and politics we want. That doesn't mean we have to be utopian and idealistic, it can be very practical. We can create a map, against which we can evaluate whether we want to support certain reforms or not. Kaba talks about 'non-reformist reforms', which in the context of prison abolition are reforms which shrink, rather than grow, the state's capacity for violence. You could apply that to individual institutions as well – reforms that shrink rather than grow the institution's capacity for violence. And one of the main features of political whiteness is its willingness to call on the oppressive power of the state and institution to redress individual injury. Privileged white people feel safe with punitive technologies – we're perfectly happy to say people should be fired or put in prison, because we know it's probably never going to happen to us. But if we try to imagine the kind of society we would like to ultimately have, a society that works for everyone, does it have prisons in it?

Imagining a society that works for everyone also requires what Angela Davis calls the 'intersectionality of struggles'. What if MeToo were to have a closer relationship with Black Lives Matter? What would be the

position on prisons then? What if people working against sexual harassment in workplaces were to have a closer relationship with the sex workers' rights movement? Who can teach us more about sexual harassment in the workplace than sex workers? Who can teach us more about the nuances of consent than sex workers? And wouldn't it be great to lend our solidarity to their struggles? What if we were to join up campaigns against reproductive coercion with trans rights – who can teach us more about bodily autonomy than trans people? And that intersectionality can be done in really practical ways. Sometimes it might be about having new conversations, following a few people on social media and listening to what they have to say, trying to reach out in small ways. Political whiteness is a default setting – for me as well. We all make mistakes. But taking our lead from more marginalized people, and trying to have a joined-up politics, is the way to go.

L: We've talked about the ways in which feminist theory is powerful and the ways in which it's perceived as threatening because it successfully destabilizes naturalized embodiments. In closing, could you reflect more on that: How is feminist theory, particularly intersectional feminist theory, useful in these struggles? What does it bring to the table?

AP: Not all feminist theory is that great, actually. The more one-dimensional analyses of patriarchy are not particularly helpful, because of all the things they miss. But intersectionality is fantastic because it's just a way of seeing the world. Kimberlé Crenshaw has said that it's not a theory, it's not a methodology – it's a framework. And it is! Once you've seen how things are connected, and not just identities or positionalities but structures as well, it's quite hard to unsee. Patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism are symbiotic systems and you have to think them together. Seeing this doesn't mean you don't make mistakes in your thinking, or that your thinking is complete – it never is. But once you have crossed that line into thinking more intersectionally, it is difficult to go back. It becomes part of who you are.

I also think feminist theory is powerful because gender is so taken for granted and so naturalized. Gender is so deeply embedded in capitalist and colonial structures that it has become part of the 'common sense' of who we are. That's why deconstructing it is so frightening and threatening. The shift to the right has involved a massive reassertion of binary gender – men are men, and women are women, Brexit means Brexit [laughs]. This is a deeply capitalist and colonial logic – capitalism needs binary gender and the heteronormative nuclear family, and colonialism exported, and continues to export, this as a means of controlling people, land, production, and resources. Feminism threatens all that – when it's done intersectionally. So perhaps this is a plot, after all!