

# 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 1/3: Akanksha Mehta

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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 Akanksha Mehta is the first of three interviews. The other interviews in this series can be found on the Sentio website.

**L: I wanted to start by talking about the politics of knowledge in some of the recent scholarship on the history of Empire. Some of these projects have openly stated their aim as re-appraising Empire as an ethical, humanitarian undertaking, and generally a force for good. Historical fact, objectivity, and empirical method feature prominently in their project descriptions to highlight claims to scientificity and truth, and their self-portrayal as detached, disinterested purveyors of fact. What is your view of the mobilization of historical fact and objectivity in this context?**

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AM: There is a lot of discussion on so-called historical facts these days. But of course the most important question here is what counts as a 'historical fact' and what doesn't. When 'historical facts' are brought in about slavery and racism, they are often discarded as not 'fact' enough, not historical enough. So the fundamental thing to think about is – who decides what is a historical fact and how does something become a historical fact. And this links to who is considered as being able to occupy the positionality of being 'objective' and who is considered the holder of historical knowledges or 'historical facts' and this, of course, is dictated by whiteness. It's also important to think about Gurminder Bhambra's work on 'methodological whiteness' here. When the assumptions are produced through coloniality, when concepts, ideas, and knowledge productions are happening through a lens of whiteness, when the archive, or 'facts', or 'history', or 'objectivity' are all being produced through whiteness – then how do we move forward? For example, take the case of the archive. If we are thinking of the archive as a place of knowledge production but limiting the idea of the archive to a physical space containing 'valid sources of data' and using 'evidence-based' methods to convert this data into knowledge, then we are producing colonial knowledge through colonial means. That archive will always be colonial – naming and classifying, excluding and leaving out – that will be the history of such an archive. The very assumption that there is such a thing like an 'objective' method that is somehow not rooted or situated in the positionality of the researcher or the material and that any knowledge is truth, is false. Decades of feminist work by black, indigenous, and women of color will tell you that you always have to situate yourself in your work, or situate your 'sources' and think about how something becomes a 'source' or a site of knowledge and about how legitimacy is granted to some knowledges and how some knowledges become legible. How can we still be having these debates?

Some of these recent projects and writings that have attempted to justify Empire and show it as a force of good have been framed as going against the grain of some larger project of 'political correctness' and these researchers see themselves as going against some homogenous grain. But actually, feminists, queer theorists, postcolonial and critical race scholars have been the ones that have been saying necessary and uncomfortable things – but what they say is seen as disruptive in a negative way. Even in the everyday context of the university, teachers and lecturers who question whiteness and hegemonic assumptions are seen as a 'problem' and as 'disruptive' and those that embody white structures are seen as adding to robust 'debates'.

**L: You mentioned that decades' worth of critical scholarship critiquing notions of empiricism and objectivity already exist. Yet somehow, its 'critics' get away with claiming that it doesn't engage in knowledge production but in navel-gazing, self-absorbed pseudo-science. It doesn't have any of the positive attributes of scientific enquiry but is often characterized, by means of feminized and racialized tropes, as naively approaching these topics.**

AM: There's so much gatekeeping in how knowledge is produced, how it should be produced, who is producing it, that what you just said is what happens all the time- Certain people are seen as being able to produce academic knowledge, especially what is considered worthy academic knowledge or impactful and legible academic knowledge, academic knowledge that is seen as going somewhere and doing something, and several others are just seen as disruptive, doing 'identity politics', being divisive, and making everything about what is seen as an agenda on race or gender or sexuality. The thing is, though, the neoliberal universities needs this 'disruptive' group, needs us, to fill their diversity agendas and to portray themselves as being tolerant and benevolent enough to give us a space and a career and resources to produce knowledge. But the university thinks that merely providing this tokenistic space is enough – it checks the boxes – but actually engaging with these critiques and even enabling them is not on the table. It is also interesting who is hired into these spaces to do this tokenistic disruptive work – it is usually those who are seen as 'palatable' people of colour who can speak the language of disruption without actually transforming the university. I'm borrowing from Priya Raghavan here, who is a PhD student at the LSE. She wrote a blogpost called 'Decolonial Discomforts' where she talks about the positionality of the people who are being called in to provide this decolonial production of the university. She argues that these people, called upon to do this work by the university, including myself, are those who can think and speak in a language that is very easy to understand for the institution, and our space in the university comes at the exclusion of black, indigenous, Dalit students and scholars. So it also becomes an easy way for the university to find a set of people (often people of colour) who will allow the university to project itself as a place of knowledge production that considers all perspectives, that gives space to disruption and discomfort, but the people chosen to be in these positions are also very carefully curated, and often tend to be those who are actually not the people who are being excluded through interconnected systems of

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oppression. So in that sense the university manages to work really well, and a lot of people in these positions (often poc) also become invested in protecting the institution and whiteness.

**L: I also wanted to talk about the ways in which this form of knowledge production is then mobilized as a form of doing progressive politics. Scholarship defending historical and contemporary colonialism often seeks to strengthen its argument through claims to stronger epistemological foundations, or producing ‘better science’. Of course we also find this in scholarship that defends naturalized gendered and racialized hierarchies. Could you talk more about that, and what it means for a science to elevate itself as better, and what are the effects of that claim?**

AM: I think that you already said it – this is knowledge and science that not only defends but is also produced through naturalized gendered and racialised hierarchies. There is no discussion or questioning of the assumptions that this knowledge is based on, on colonial methods and methodologies that underpin it. And yet, or hence, this work is pitched as progressive. In the current political discourse where phrases like ‘politically correct’ and ‘identity politics’ are used to discredit struggles on gender, sexuality, race, caste – this becomes ‘progressive’. Because progress is seen through liberal frames where we ‘move beyond the past’ and learn to ‘live together in peace’ and have the ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ to say what we want and do what we want and anyone who doesn’t like that is ‘fragile’, ‘divisive’, and ‘gets offended easily’. But this whole freedom of speech argument is constructed through gendered and racialised hierarchies and liberal values so it will always uphold colonial binaries and projects.

And this whole idea of ‘objectivity’ – what is that? Feminist and decolonial/anticolonial knowledge production teaches you time and again, that there no ‘objective answers’ and that it is colonial knowledge production that follows this path of evidence-based ‘objective’ research. ‘Objective’ and even ‘scientific’ research is built from going to the formerly colonized world and reducing centuries of oppression and violence and extraction to certain numbers/experiments that make up a ‘cost/benefit’ analysis that is inherently racialised and gendered. And this is then pitched as ‘progressive’ and ‘better’.

**L: I also wanted to discuss the proliferation of attacks on gender studies and gender studies scholars. Why is this happening now, with this intensity and frequency?**

AM: The easy answer to your question would be to think of the way the right wing has developed force in recent years. A lot of these right-wing movements mobilize gender and seek to reify gender norms and positionalities. Anything that dislodges that cis-het gender binary that remains crucial to these movements is seen as dangerous by them. Fundamentally gender studies, critical race studies, the scholars that you’ve mentioned – Butler, Crenshaw etc. – are all pushing and chipping away at what gender is and how we understand it. They’re making you unlearn everything that you knew about the world and about gender, and about the way societies and bodies and everything has been organized through gender. So I think there’s a backlash there and at these scholars/fields that becomes an easy way to project the anxieties against what’s happening.

And I think for a long time, academia was fairly closed off. It still is of course, no doubt about that, but more and more you are seeing academics speaking on social media and taking on public roles, making their work visible and sometimes even mainstreamed. With regards to gender studies, ‘popular’ and mainstream white feminism has also done a huge disservice here. It has ‘popularized’ feminism in such hollow ways, removing the politics from the word, whitewashing the term, and yet at the same time drawing attention to it from those who stand against it.

Regarding the ‘Grievance Studies’ hoax article, on the one hand I was really happy that the entire episode showed that these academic journals are not the best place to share our work and that we should be actively resisting all of these publishing models, and that we should be thinking about how knowledge production can take on many forms and shapes. On the other hand, I was really unhappy that the group went after gender and race work. It’s hard enough when gender studies departments are shutting down across the world, when gender studies work is still not seen as knowledge production by other ‘disciplines’, and when people are always asking you how is gender relevant, even after 30-40 years of feminist theorizing. In that sense, the hoax wasn’t doing anyone a favour by wanting to expose the foolishness of academia by choosing to do it through attacking gender studies and related critical work. To be honest, I’m just really tired of it – feminist, queer,

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critical race, postcolonial theories are not just theories, they are your life – you literally survive, make meanings and worlds through them, you heal through them and it is really harrowing to see that these are the spaces that people want to discredit.

**L: This is a point I wanted to raise with you because many of these so-called critics claim that they're making these interventions to make these disciplines better. They say that there's a fraudulent portion within these disciplines that don't do proper science, and if we expose them as methodologically unsound, it would be better for everyone involved. That's not possible, of course, because if we had the same ideas about methodology and epistemology as the people conducting these hoaxes, we wouldn't have critical theory.**

AM: Exactly! I think what was really upsetting was how this entire project was disguised as making 'disciplines better' but was actually about showing how gender studies, sexuality studies etc. was a 'joke'. Yes, there is a need to call out some of the work that happens within these fields, for example, some feminist and queer work is clouded in whiteness and perpetuates racist narratives and ableist frameworks and we need to call that out, there is no question about that. But the hoax was not interested in that kind of calling out. If we really want work in these fields to be more rigorous and less (white) Eurocentric, then we can call it out through sustained critiques. For example, I am thinking of feminist work in/from South Asia that continues to privilege upper-caste voices, knowledges, and frameworks and omits discussions on caste carefully. Or of white feminist work that erases race from discussions on gender and sexuality and relies on racist frameworks. There is always an urgent need to call this work out, to question its frameworks and omissions, to situate the 'knowledge' it produces and the problems with it. And scholars have been doing that. But this hoax and other such projects are not about that. They are not about that kind of calling out and that kind of political project. What these kinds of hoaxes end up doing is making things difficult for everybody, and especially for black, indigenous, women of colour scholars and anyone who is already marginalized in academia – people who are doing really amazing and critical work. This hoax narrative discredits entire disciplines and fields, potentially cutting down funding pathways, employment opportunities, and departments. And what that leads to is privileged (white feminist) scholars, whose work is the one that should be called out, continuing to inhabit powerful positions and marginalized scholars bearing the brunt of the discrediting and potential cuts. So this exercise is quite pointless, especially in this global moment right now where things are already so contested and tense around gender – is this really the best possible project to undertake now? For whom is this project being undertaken?