

Why Following the Rules Will Not Stop Them

An Exploration of Anti-gender Presence
in Swedish Universities

ABSTRACT

The last few decades have witnessed the emergence of several knowledge traditions within academic clusters inspired by and engaged in productive dialogue with transnational social movements such as feminist, queer, trans* and Crip studies, critical race theory, indigenous studies, and degrowth scholarship (Choudry & Kappor 2010; Bhattacharyya & Murji 2013; Carruthers 2018; Salisbury & Connelly 2021). Despite significant theoretical and methodological differences, these traditions share a recognition of the fundamental role played by social actors outside academia in the struggle for social justice in academic knowledge production. Recent decades have also witnessed the emergence of ethnonationalist and anti-gender social movements, networks, and political parties attacking these academic traditions and focusing on the university as a fundamental arena for generating and reproducing their ideologies of hate (Perry 2009). These attacks target academic fields and individual scholars sharing a commitment to social justice issues (Floyd 2009) and an understanding of knowledge production inside academia as contributing to visions of social justice beyond academia (Young 2000). Central to these threats against scholars working within social justice paradigms is the argument that their scholarly production is “political” and hence unscientific. In this article, we explore the politics of knowledge claims among key anti-gender and right-wing actors within and related to academic institutions in Sweden. Inspired by the concepts of neoliberal depoliticising and neoliberal governance, we analyse arguments

and strategies from 2015 to 2021 designed to undermine gender studies and to create and establish arenas for right-wing ethnonationalist knowledge production within the academia.

Keywords: anti-gender, depoliticising academia, politics of knowledge, social justice

WE ARE COMMITTED to the development of forms of collective knowledge production within academia that sustain the visions and hopes of more equal and democratic societies. We are equally committed to transnational struggles aiming to decolonise universities (Gopal 2021).

However, it is impossible to contribute to the development of such hopes when racism in both public and academic debates is deemed a “sensitive subject”, gender and sexuality are characterised as “complex issues,” and climate change and migration are referred to as “controversial topics.” Decades’ worth of scholarly research in these areas is dismissed as mere “political” opinion, which by implication lacks scientific value. In academia, the risk of being paralysed at the intersection between neoliberal depoliticisation and neoliberal governance impedes our ability and responsibility to imagine other and better futures.

The last few decades have witnessed the emergence of several knowledge traditions within academic clusters inspired by and engaged in productive dialogue with transnational social movements such as feminist, queer, trans* and Crip studies, critical race theory, indigenous studies, and degrowth scholarship (Choudry & Kappor 2010; Bhattacharyya & Murji 2013; Carruthers 2018; Salisbury & Connelly 2021). Despite significant theoretical and methodological differences, these traditions share a recognition of the fundamental role played by social actors outside academia in the struggle for social justice in academic knowledge production. Recent decades have also witnessed the emergence of ethnonationalist and anti-gender social movements, networks, and political parties attacking these academic traditions and focusing on the university as a fundamental arena for generating and reproducing their ideologies of hate (Perry 2009). These attacks target academic fields and individual scholars sharing a commitment to social justice issues

(Floyd 2009) and an understanding of knowledge production inside academia as contributing to visions of social justice beyond academia (Young 2000). Central to these threats against scholars working within social justice paradigms is the argument that their scholarly production is “political” and hence unscientific.

In this article, we explore the politics of knowledge claims among key anti-gender and right-wing actors within and related to academic institutions in Sweden. Inspired by the concepts of neoliberal depoliticisation and neoliberal governance, we analyse arguments and strategies from 2015 to 2021 designed to undermine gender studies and to create and establish arenas for right-wing ethnonationalist knowledge production within the academia.

Neoliberal Depoliticisation and Neoliberal Governance

Political philosophers within the tradition of critical theory understand neoliberal depoliticisation to mean the denial of political choice, the delegation of decision-making to technocratic experts, and growing public disengagement from politics. They argue that by shifting power to transnational corporations and markets, processes of depoliticisation pose a threat to democracy and the public, narrowing civil society as well as the idea of democracy itself. Terms like “post-democratic” (Rancine 1998, 2001) and “post-political” or “post-democracy” (Mouffe 2005, 2018) connote a radical shift in Western institutions and public culture, where genuine political challenges and conflicts are seen as beyond the democratic realm.

In *Anti-politics, Depoliticisation, and Governance* (Fawcett et al. 2018), the authors deploy the concept of depoliticisation to explain how government institutions create practices and discourses that lead to public apathy (anti-politics) and undermine resistance to dominant societal values despite public discontent. In her book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (2020), political philosopher Wendy Brown shows how authoritarian and antidemocratic movements are grounded in a focus on the individual and disinterest in the political and the social.

Scholars have also identified the transformation of higher education policy through juridification, a focus on the law, and judicial rulings as a way of resolving political controversies and issues of public policy (Novak 2019; Selberg 2021). Our analysis is also informed by the concept of neoliberal governance (Brabazon 2018; Santos & Jenson 2000), that explores both the promises of justice through juridification of the social (Clark 2008) and the position of those who resist within a juridified political sphere.

In Sweden, anti-gender and ethnonationalist coalitions threaten scholars working within social justice paradigms and seek to eliminate fields of knowledge in universities. As we will show, they do this by appropriating certain terms and concepts to legitimise their claims, including freedom of speech, academic freedom, objectivity, and neutrality. These terms are used to assign new meanings to various laws, regulations, and rules that emerged in an earlier context from different discursive fields and normative processes. One important starting point for our analysis, then, is the understanding that ethnonationalist and anti-gender coalitions have successfully assigned new meanings to established rules, regulations, and concepts that were originally informed by a social democratic welfare model and operationalised by a centralised state bureaucracy (Boreus 1997; Larsson et al. 2012). These principles have been fundamental to the institutionalisation (and success) of Swedish gender studies (Linason 2011) and have to some extent protected students, teachers, and researchers from corruption and biased grading. One example is the principles of meritocracy operationalised through gender equality visions (Malström 2012) that challenged pre-existing ideals of homosociality within academia.

However, anti-gender and ethnonationalist activists have interpellated these laws, regulations, and rules to create a new and radical rhetoric. We argue that it is crucial to revisit these regulations and their ongoing discursive transformation in order to understand gender scholars' current subjectivities and practices.

Chantal Mouffe stressed the importance of engaging with institutions rather than withdrawing from them, arguing that radical politics

is “envisaged by the hegemonic approach, and such a project requires an agonistic engagement with institutions” (Mouffe 2013a, 75; 2018). Wendy Brown addressed the need for institutional support for democratic development as an important argument for the struggle at this level: “Democracy without the political is an oxymoron; the sharing of power that democracy entails is a uniquely political project requiring cultivation, renewal, and institutional support” (2020, 57). Academia is one such institution.

Materials and Methods

This article forms part of the VR research programme “An ethnographic exploration of anti-genderism: ideas, identities and political practices in the Nordic region,” which collects a diverse range of empirical materials linked to anti-gender discourses. For this paper, we have selected material from the period 2015–2021, focusing on events where the role of universities, what knowledge is and who owns that knowledge are discussed. As public events, they attracted local and national media coverage, as well as significant social media interest. We followed the trajectory of these events and examined how different meanings were discursively constructed (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and what the problem was considered to be (Bacchi 2009). In so doing, we identified key actors, networks, coalitions, arguments, and discursive nodes in newspapers, social media posts, university policies, laws, and regulations. The empirical material we collected has been analysed through a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2006), a method that allows for the identification of patterns of meaning in relation to a research question. Thus, the thematic analysis will be theoretically informed, zigzagging between theory and data. The method’s well-known stages (transcription, familiarisation with the data, selective and complete coding, searching and reviewing themes, defining themes and writing) provide a productive platform that creates a space for collaboration between scholars analysing the same empirical material.

Anti-genderism, Its Far-Right Context, and Its Relation to the University

Scholars Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2022) emphasise the close relationship between the global anti-gender movement and far-right populist and authoritarian political parties. Eszter Kováts and Maari Põim (2015) note the special role of anti-gender discourses as a symbolic glue in right-wing criticism of multicultural European societies (Graff, Kalpur & Walters 2019; Corredor 2019). Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) refer to the phenomenon as “anti-gender campaigns” or “anti-gender crusades,” noting that this movement exists in what is generally regarded as stable democracies. Although the movements remain organisationally distinct, there is also evidence of a considerable overlap between far-right groups’ agendas regarding migration, conservative secular views on the family, and national and fundamentalistic religious discourses around gender (Kötting et al. 2017; Martinsson 2020; Graff & Korolczuk 2022). Sociologist Sylvia Walby (2018) analyses the decline of social democracy in Europe and the increase in anti-gender perspectives, and explores the relationship of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and fascism to violence against women.

These anti-gender coalitions commonly draw on rhetoric of free speech, academic freedom and human rights to advance their perspectives and agendas, and some of their key actors are members of academic institutions, often occupying leading positions in different disciplines – for instance, as established professors – with ready access to national and local media (Näser 2021; Korolczuk 2020; Titley 2019; Scott 2019). Gender studies, “gender theory,” and “gender ideology” are frequently dismissed by these coalitions as totalitarian and authoritarian attempts to intervene in the “natural” development of men and women while discriminating against the former (von Redecker 2016).

Anti-gender coalitions within higher education have, in the Nordic countries, successfully articulated distinct knowledge claims that symbolically and physically threaten scholars in areas ranging from gender/queer/trans* to environment and migration. In support of these claims,

the targeted scholarly traditions are characterised as “political,” “unscientific,” or “Islam-friendly” (Gunnarsson Payne 2019; Martinsson 2020, Engebretsen 2022). For example, On June 1, 2021, the Danish parliament passed a motion condemning “excessive activism in research environments,” which was supported by the social democratic party as well as by the conservative-liberal Venstre and parties on the right wing. The motion argued that some academic fields, including those committed to research on gender, migration, and whiteness, as well as postcolonial studies, disguise politics as science (Pedersen 2021). In Sweden, it has been claimed that gender mainstreaming threatens the university (Arpi & Wyndhamn 2020), while gender studies has been accused of oppressing “ordinary people” and of being the ideological motor of gender ideology (Gunnarsson Payne 2019).

Neoliberal De-politicisation in Sweden

Given that premise, therefore, no funds should be allocated to this indoctrination based on politically false grounds. In practice, various educations with a focus linked to gender theory should not be financed by state funds and its existence within the framework of other subject areas should be avoided as much as possible. (Tobias Anderson (Sweden Democrats) Motion: 2019/20, 813)

The first and most fundamental paradox of anti-gender movements in Sweden is that their systematic and vociferous defence of free speech and academic freedom (supposedly threatened by feminists) and their demands for a university “free” from state control, are accompanied by calls for state intervention against gender studies. These proposals closely resemble the position of transnational anti-gender activists with close links to far-right parties and movements (Graff & Korolczuk 2021). In Sweden, however, this rhetoric is characterised by what remains *unspoken*: gender scholars’ political commitment to social justice projects. In other countries, gender studies is seen as a threat inspired by critical theory, as in the identification of poststructuralism with Islam (France); with activism (Denmark); cultural Marxism (Holland); or more general criticism of what is considered the hegemony of the left.

In Sweden, most of the arguments remain centred on historical tensions between science and politics around the production of knowledge. As we will show, the political agenda is not only to demean the Other as lacking certain values, but to construct the anti-gender movement as embodying those values, which include objectivity, neutrality, and scientific rigour. These arguments underpin the success of political parties like the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) and the Citizens' Coalition (Medborgerlig samling) who have created a narrative around the systematic attack on values like free speech and academic freedom by gender studies:

In its most overwrought form, gender studies is more about very odd opinions and political opinions than about science. (Jan Ericson (Moderaterna) in *Folkbladet*, January 11, 2019)

The whole subject [gender studies] is based on opinions, which means that one can agree or disagree. If one has a liberal basic view and believes that people are individuals with their own will and responsibility, then these power structures are misleading, gross generalisations of society. (Utas Josefin and Claes Andersson (Medborgerlig samling) in *NWT*, February 19, 2019)

The need to defend universities from the threat of gender and queer studies as authoritarian ideologies with no basis in science is also expressed by the Conservative Federation (CF) [Konservativa förbundet], a growing student organisation led by Julian Kroon, who also works for the ethnonationalist Sweden Democrats (SVT 2020). According to Kroon, CF has grown from five members in 2019 to a thousand in 2020 and aims to challenge “the dominance of political correctness” by organising students at Swedish universities. Kroon emphasises the need for conservative activism to transform opinion within universities. While mentioning gender studies and social work, Kroon shifts towards emphasising that these disciplines are “hardly objective and truth-seeking” (Angry Foreigner 2020; RIKS 2021). This pro-Trump (at least

until January 6, 2021) federation illustrates how the views of conservative, right-wing, and ethnonationalist activists are openly articulated at university level today.

Another example of this political drive to transform the university is the conservative think tank Oikos, which is also led by a Sweden Democrat. Oikos and CF share the ambition to challenge critical traditions of thought: “A necessary step in that process is to break the half-century-old control of socialism and liberalism over the initiative and hegemony of problem formulation in the intellectual sphere” (Tankesmedjan Oikos 2022). Both CF and Oikos view the university as a political arena and knowledge as political, and indeed, we agree with that view. However, these groups also seek to control the formulation of societal problems and to construct the Other – in this case, gender and queer studies scholars – as less than objective or truth-seeking and therefore not entitled to university status.

According to these hateful ideologies (Goldberg 2023), feminists are “taking over” the university, a view reflected in newspaper headlines like “Gender studies has become an over-church [överkyrka] at Lund University,” “Gender Studies is Sweden’s own creationism,” “Gender studies takes over Swedish universities,” and “the Brainwashing in Sweden continues” (Arpi 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; 2017d). We use the term hateful ideologies to illuminate the connection between the construction of the category of feminist as a threat to the university and similar constructions of the category of feminists as a threat to the nation in right-wing political agendas. We use it also to underline the connection between representations of others (in this case feminist scholars) as a threat, and the increasing attacks on feminist scholars, journalists and cultural workers by the extreme right wing.

The headlines above echo the logic of anti-Muslim racism in Sweden (Kolankiewicz 2015), in these hateful ideologies, the notion of “taking over” articulates an emotional regime of resentment (Fassin 2019). These hateful worldviews create feelings of anger through fantasies of “underserving others,” accessing what is thought of as belonging to the subject. Resentment is grounded in processes of entitlement and socialisation

(Jackson & McDonald 2019), through which privileged groups learn to explain their societal position (and presumed superiority) in terms of what they have come to believe are their individual merits.

Not Following the Rules

As the anti-gender studies talk and action discussed above is orchestrated by organised groups seeking to influence the university and the politics of knowledge production, we turn now to the orchestrated efforts to depoliticise the university. In particular, we explore the efforts to depoliticise students by telling them that moving from their subject position as “students” to become “activists” means not following the rules.

To develop an analytical perspective on depoliticisation, we have chosen to focus on the much-discussed case referred to as the “Butler event.” This occurred in November 2017 at the Department of Political Science at Lund University, where students had demanded increased inclusion of female-authored readings on a course where the literature was dominated by male authors. Based on department, faculty, and university regulations, students argued that a gender balanced course syllabus would provide a better understanding of the topic. In media coverage, however, the focus shifted from the lack of female scholars included on academic curricula to the lack of academic freedom in Sweden that forced teachers to include topics related to women and gender (Sande 2019).

This framing of the conflict is itself a process of depoliticisation; according to the media, students were not confronting their teachers about a tradition in which scientific truth is regulated by excluding others. Instead, the conflict was from the outset framed as an issue of following the stipulated institutional rules. This created a space in which the ensuing national debate shifted away from the issue of epistemic privilege (Fricker 2007) to forms of neoliberal governance and what is allowed and not in Swedish universities.

The political science teacher Erik Ringmar resisted the idea of including a fifteen-page text by the scholar Judith Butler. After “the Butler event”, he wrote a book called *Liberate the University* (2019), calling for strategies to “free” Swedish universities from the political correctness

currently imposed by the market and the state. Ringmar further argued that the lack of academic freedom reinforces the influence of emotions in the university, accommodating practices related to victimisation and “trigger warnings.” He concluded that emotions, just like political governance, have no place in universities. In his review of the book, Bo Rothstein – a political science professor widely known for his criticism of gender studies and other new academic fields (Fahlgren & Sjöstedt Landén 2014) – noted the contradictions in Ringmar’s analysis and its ignorance of university structures. In so doing, Rothstein constructed a boundary between his own position, as the voice of the academic mainstream that has historically resisted gender studies, and other critical traditions, and the position of anti-gender, as for example Ringmar’s.

The background to *Liberate the University*, a new book by the political scientist Erik Ringmar, is an event that took place just over a year ago at the Department of Political Science in Lund, where Ringmar is a teacher. When he was about to submit the bibliography for one of the courses he was responsible for, he was criticised by student activists for deleting an article by celebrated feminist theorist Judith Butler.

Ringmar’s arguments for removing the article in question were good; the text simply did not work for the course. ... But the threat to academic freedom that he describes comes not from any central bureaucratic body but from activist students. (Rothstein 2019)

Rothstein defends university practices (bureaucratic body) that aim to reinscribe historically excluded groups (women) from the curriculum. However, in his narrative, the word “activist” transforms the subject position of a person with specific acknowledged rights (student) to a troublemaker or activist and, as such, a person without rights. Rothstein takes for granted the teacher’s epistemic privilege (Medina 2012) in constructing the narrative of a reasonable or knowing (as opposed to the unreasonableness of student activists) subject: “the text did not work for the course.”

In this way, Rothstein shifts the problem from state control of the university towards the category he has constructed: the student activist as an enemy that threatens academic freedom. Within academia, this distinction between students and “students making trouble” is a core feature of the mobilisation against gender studies. This creation of an outsider, constructed as out of place and a threat to the academy is a fundamental performative strategy. This strategy represents a break from the norm in Swedish academia, where – paradoxically – student representatives are not only expected but required to participate formally in department and faculty boards. However, today they are also expected (or pressured) to focus on “student issues.”

In this context, the forms of governance that regulate protest in Sweden are of immediate relevance to our argument. The reaction seldom focuses on the issue at hand, but instead on following “regulations.” For a centralistic state apparatus that is historically committed to social democratic hegemony – now rearticulated as a neoliberal/neoconservative ideology (Ålund et al. 2016; Giritli Nygren et al. 2018) – consent is created not only by framing the voices of dissent as a threat to social cohesion, but also by systematically shifting and transforming political issues into formalised and bureaucratic matters (Larsson et al. 2012; Österberg 2020). Our analysis highlights the role of centralised and extensive state and institutional bureaucracies (expanded and transformed by neoliberalism) in depoliticisation and the pathologisation of resistance.

The social democratic regime was built on a centralised state apparatus framed by solid rule-making and rule-obeying state institutions that regulated social uprising through co-optation and the exclusion of dissidents. In short, the phenomenon of depoliticization is not new to the Swedish landscape, but the key social actors in state hegemony have changed radically. In the past – whatever their shortcomings – social democrats were committed to developing an agenda based on gender equality and social inclusion. Today, the state apparatus has to a certain extent been transformed to operationalise neoliberal and ethnonationalist agendas. This is especially visible in areas of education, migration and gender equality politics (Reimers & Martinsson 2017, Mulinari & Neergaard 2022).

In *Genusdoktrinen* [The Gender Doctrine] (2020), journalist Ivar Arpi and education scholar Anna-Karin Wyndhamn take their point of departure in the “Butler event,” as well as in what came to be known as the “Hesslow event.” Accounts of the latter vary considerably, depending on position. According to students, the event was initiated by students challenging the anti-feminist ideas and opinions put forward by a professor during a lecture at the Faculty of Medicine at Lund University (Lundagård 2018).

One of the students argued that the topic of the lecture, which focused overtly on biological differences as the explanation for societal differences between women and men, was beyond the teacher’s expertise. To illustrate the teacher’s biases, the student cited examples such as the assertion that “homosexual women have a ‘male sexual inclination.’”

The tension between the particular professor and the students was nothing new; the same thing happened almost every year. The faculty’s response to student demands was to invite gender studies scholars for an “extra lecture.” On this occasion, however, the involvement of key anti-gender intellectuals and transnational anti-gender coalitions meant that the event had a national impact and attracted media attention. The teacher garnered support from Academic Rights Watch (a foundation that aims to protect the academic freedom of teachers and researchers) and from the right-wing think-tank Timbro. The Academic Teacher Union (SULF) also defended the professor’s academic freedom and even asserted his knowledge of the topic in question. An article from *Smedjan*, Timbro’s web-journal (revealingly entitled “Medical Education is Transformed into a Political Agenda”), framed the event as follows:

An individual student’s complaint is used as an excuse to politicise the medical program in Lund. The proposed measures divert education away from biological and evolutionary explanatory models and are likely to discourage any university teacher who in the future is considering lecturing on topics that may be perceived as controversial. Is this how a university should work? (Lundberg 2018)

Academic Rights Watch concluded its analysis in the following way:

This leads to a situation where a position based on empirical biology and evolutionary theory appears extreme while a direction (Gender Studies) that is not particularly interested in empirical analysis but assumes that biology plays a subordinate role in society is marketed as normal. (Academic Rights Watch 2018)

Both Timbro and Academic Rights Watch are articulating views typical for the anti-gender movement. The criticism directed towards the professor by one student becomes a threat to the university itself: teachers might not want to teach “controversial” topics. The reference, in both examples, to biology as “real knowledge” in contrast to gender studies, is also typical for the anti-gender movement (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017; Korolczuk 2020). “Empirical biology” is framed as the normal (note the emphasis on *empirical*, meaning true or objective) while gender studies is represented as a tradition with no commitment to empirical research (translation: no interested in *the real*). It can be argued that the student sought to defend scientific standards by demanding the inclusion of diverse theoretical perspectives and teachers with scientific knowledge of, rather than mere opinions on the topic. Instead, however, the student was accused of promoting a feminist political agenda that challenged the professor’s knowledge (the “evidence”) of biological differences between women and men. While acknowledging the student’s right to critically engage, the local SULF representative Mats Ericsson defended the teacher by referring explicitly to politicisation: “Academic education should not be politicised but should be based on science and proven experience” (*University World News* 2018). While the teacher as a knowing subject is again reconstructed as providing (teaching) scientific knowledge, the students (activists) are seen to engage in feminist politics.

The tenor of these debates was perhaps best captured by a national newspaper article asserting that the presence of women in universities threatens free speech. Three of the authors were members of Academic Rights Watch and two of the members worked in the Department of

Theology at Lund University. They argued that the risk of irrational responses increases with women's presence in academic clusters: "We are heading towards a time when it will become more difficult to tell the truth as increasingly broad groups within the university cannot handle the truth" (Heberlein, Madison, Olsson & Zetterholm 2020).

A reading of anti-genderism as a discursive field confirms the centrality of the presence of specific bodies (women/feminist/queer/racialised) as disturbing the everyday "normality" of academic culture. In her study of anti-genderism in Germany, Paula Villa (2017) identified a loss of normality or of "natural" subjects and identities as the key driver of anti-gender mobilisation.

During the present research, a number of events in Swedish academia connected with and inspired by the movement #RhodesMustFall, have taken place. Originally this movement started at the University of Cape Town, and in protests against the presence of statues of the coloniser Cecil Rhodes. The protests inspired a global movement aimed at the decolonisation of higher education (Chantiluke et al. 2018; Bhambra et al. 2020). Three of the Swedish events have had a national impact: the mobilisation of students at the Department of Media, University of Gothenburg, against an invited lecturer from the ethnonationalist party the Sweden Democrats (*Dagens Nyheter* 2019); the mobilisation of students at the Department of Health and Sexuality, Malmö University, against what the students characterised as racist frames in the curriculum (*Sydsvenskan* 2021) and the mobilisation of students at Stockholm's University for Arts, Crafts and Design against the "white room" (Brown Island 2021).

Although these mobilisations differed significantly in terms of aim and content, the responses they elicited were strikingly similar. In the three events, students who demanded social transformation and inclusion (and who were supported by many teachers and scholars) were accused of a wide range of offences, including censorship, the blocking of freedom of speech (Allwood et al. 2019; Al-Fakir, et al. 2019) and making infantile or politicised demands that prevented discussions of "sensitive" issues and obscured scientific knowledge.

It is noteworthy that when infantilisation, humiliation, and threats prove ineffective, neoliberal governance resorts to punishment to resolve conflict, as in the case of the students in Malmö University who were told that, according to university rules, “Intentionally disrupting or trying to impede lecturers’ ongoing teaching may be subject to university disciplinary measures” (Mikkelsen 2021). Those who resisted were accused not so much of being wrong regarding the need to open for an academic debate on the specific topic, as of not following the rules, being out of place, especially with respect to the form, content, body language, and terms through which their arguments were articulated.

The Borders and the Clash of the Political

Finally, we must consider how we ourselves engage with the processes of depoliticisation. In this regard, one central question is whether we can use laws and regulations as well as buzzwords as tools for the *repoliticisation* of societal institutions. In October 2019, the Department of Gender Studies at Lund University hosted the third Marxist Feminist Conference. The conference attracted scholars from Europe and the Global South, including internationally recognised scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. A few months after the conference, the department’s director of studies and the conference organisers (including Diana) received an email informing them that the Parliamentary Ombudsmen (JO) had been notified about a Refugees Welcome flag displayed outside the conference hall but on university grounds. The notification made everyone very nervous; the organising group had allowed the flag, and were told by the university management that (what they referred to as) “political symbols” were not allowed on university grounds.

While the notification did not lead to any disciplinary action, the event raised questions about how the political is regulated in Swedish universities. The resistance to the Refugees Welcome flag highlighted the chaotic and inconsistent implementation of rules and regulations. Lund University (like most universities in Sweden) displays the rainbow flag once a year in the central university building, thanks to the

courageous work of thousands of activists, and this has become a proud university tradition. What, then, makes the rainbow flag an accepted symbol of Lund University's values, while the Refugees Welcome flag is seen as a political symbol that must be excluded in order to preserve university neutrality?

Our next example is from the spring of 2020, when Black Lives Matter (BLM) became a transnational movement, bringing thousands of people together during the COVID-19 pandemic in protests that extended beyond the US to Europe, including Swedish cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. Statues were toppled, and universities, departments, and scholars across the world made clear that they supported this powerful movement. Lena and some of her colleagues decided to write a manifesto declaring that, in solidarity with the BLM movement, they would initiate a seminar series and develop a related course. Lena asked the head of the department if it would be possible to publish the manifesto on the department's web page. The answer was no: the law of administration prohibits civil servants from taking such a stand.

In the spring of 2021, Lena was asked alongside some of her colleagues to endorse a Palestine Solidarity Statement expressing support for the Palestinian people under attack from Israel. The statement was signed and published on the websites of more than a hundred departments of women's and gender studies across the world, many of them highly ranked. Lena regretfully concluded that this would not be possible at the University of Gothenburg, and this was confirmed by the head of department, who recognised the problem and the associated paradoxes. As a scholar, you have academic freedom, but you are also a civil servant. When Lena investigated who had published an endorsement at that point in time, she could find no such statement in Sweden or any other Scandinavian country. She realised that this depoliticised practice – declining to sign or publish – might be typical of Swedish (and perhaps all Scandinavian) universities.

The story could have ended there and we – Diana and Lena – could, as we have done so many times before, both have reverted to being what

we regarded as good civil servants, acting the way neoliberal marketisation and the anti-gender movement required, by not taking a stand, not being political. Instead, we began to scrutinise the relevant governance documents, including one from Lund University.

Lund University is part of a worldwide university community and supports the basic values agreed by European universities in the Magna Charta Universitatum establishing the importance of autonomy and academic freedom. Universities must be free from external pressure in defending the freedom, integrity, and quality of education and research. These values are also anchored in the laws that any Swedish state authority must follow. University activities must safeguard democracy, legality, objectivity, free speech, and respect for everyone's equal value, efficiency and service, as well as democratic principles and human freedom and rights. All of our activities are informed by fundamental principles of gender equality and diversity. Other longstanding values that characterize Lund University include critical and reflective perspectives, objectivity, impartiality, curiosity, commitment, compassion, and humor. (Strategisk plan för Lunds Universitet 2017–2026; authors' translation)

It could be argued that in order to act on the values inscribed in the European Magna Charta in Sweden, it would be necessary to critically assess the historical continuities between a past framed by colonial and sexist fantasies enacted in the name of science and a present shaped by systematic forms of exclusion and discrimination (Sandell 2014; Mählck 2018; Behtoui & Leivestad 2019). Instead, as we have shown, these values – especially ideas of objectivity and neutrality – are now mobilised against critical thinking, silencing social justice agendas that name social conflicts rather than speaking the language of “social sustainability” that appears in the university marketing profile.

We are the first to admit that we have not been entirely alert to the content or the potential power of these documents, and in this, we are not alone. Exploring the role of the *European Magna Charta* (MCO 2022), the Living Value project at Stockholm University reported that

most employees ignore the existence of these documents and their function within academia (Widding 2018). For those who have experienced negative racialisation, which for example Diana has, and who have seen how rules are systematically implemented through forms of arrogant perception (Ortega 2006) in the (false) belief that the ultimate goal of university regulations is to secure “equal value for all” [*alla likas värde*], it is easy to become and remain ignorant of these documents. Instead, rules, policies, and regulations seem central to the reproduction of hierarchical social relations – at least in the face of resistance to those relations.

In the state of paranoia that international rankings and competition have induced, there is a risk that universities will use rules and regulations as a fundamental means of performing neutrality. This strategy is one of the key techniques of modern power: the embodiment of surveillance practices in the language of bureaucracy. While the University core values seem to encourage the academy to stand for social justice and against ideologies of hate, there is however a risk that they will instead be seen as “empty words and clichés” (Brage & Lövkrona 2018).

This is not an argument against bureaucracy as such but against how the neoliberal/marketing bureaucracy may work. It appears to support diversity and positive academic ranking but seldom addresses structural racism (Ahmed 2012). According to Kate Nash (2018), New Public Management is explicitly opposed to bureaucracy, but its tenets are woven into the fabric of institutions like the university through bureaucratic transformation. Nash argues that neo-liberalisation of the universities is advancing by means of this bureaucratic revolution. We further contend that authoritarian discourses like anti-genderism form part of that bureaucratisation, making it crucial to struggle against this tendency to save our institutions as Mouffe (2018) and Brown (2020) have urged.

We believe this is a hegemonical struggle that begins with a simple reminder; *objectivity* is not an essential category, and empty words and buzzwords are also empty signifiers that can be filled with meaning and used in a different way. What, we ask, are anti-gender actors referring to when they argue that we must be depoliticised, other than their own

interpretation of objectivity? In this context, we examined *Den statliga värdegrunden – gemensamma principer för god förvaltning* (DSV) [*Government Value Foundations – Joint Principles for Good Administration*] (Statskontoret 2019), which interpellates leaders and state employees, telling them how to act and how to view themselves. It was not difficult to find support for our agency and our ambition to stand for the vulnerable against injustice, for equality and democracy.

According to the DSV, “The form of government states that the public sector must, among other things, work to ensure that the ideas of democracy guide all areas of society.” For different political perspectives, democracy can indeed have different meanings (Laclau 2007), and we believe it is important to participate in that interpretative struggle. The DSV supports us by telling us what it means to be guided by democratic ideas. For instance, it states that the public sector should work to ensure participation and equality for all members of society and to protect children’s rights. In order to help the reader understand what can be perceived as undemocratic, DSV gives an example, namely a funding application to the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society from the Sweden Democrats’ youth organisation. The application was denied by the agency because the organisation’s values were not democratic. That strong discursive request to act in a democratic way is surely also a call to scholars in institutions, but this demand is not reiterated in the ongoing debate. Similarly, the interpretation of objectivity that should supposedly inform our actions as civil servants is also explicitly stated in the DSV:

You must be objective and impartial in all activities.

The principle of objectivity means that the authorities are obliged to act objectively and impartially in all situations. This objectivity must also characterize things that are outside the scope of pure decision-making. The principle of objectivity can also be interpreted as a prohibition. As a government employee, it is forbidden to look after interests other than those you are to satisfy. It is also prohibited to make decisions on grounds other than those set out in the rules in the case in question (Den Statliga värdegrunden 2019:15)

On a general level, this is quite simple. Government employees must not take irrelevant matters into account when making decisions. For example, you must not allow friendships, family ties, or personal perceptions to influence your decisions. In practice, however, matters become more complicated due to the many situations, behaviours and phenomena the principle of objectivity extends over. Examples of situations that complicate objectivity are situations that involve conflicts of interest, employee sideline activities, and issues concerning how government employees should treat the public.

The quotation above highlights the importance of being objective and unbiased – for instance, by resisting corruption and informal networks. These regulations are obviously relevant in a social democratic welfare society that seeks to ensure the inclusion of historically excluded groups. Now, however, the same rules are being used to limit academic freedom and the political and democratic space of scholars. Rather than arguing against this form of authoritarian depoliticisation, we reproduce it ourselves. This discursive process of transformation and reiteration must be interrupted and challenged by scholars emphasising that research addressing social justice, discrimination, and the struggle for equality is *truth-seeking*, *objectivity expanding* and *empirically solid* scholarly work.

Concluding Reflections

We have examined how the academic freedom of critical research in general and gender and queer studies in particular is constrained when laws and regulations are articulated and so transformed by conservative, libertarian, and anti-gender discourses. Anyone acting against the anti-genderist interpretation of these governing texts now risks being characterised as “political.” We view this transformation of meaning as a depoliticising process; by simply exercising their rights, students are labelled “activists,” and as such, a threat to academia.

Mainstream responses to struggles for social justice within academia are often acknowledged as being a shared majoritarian agenda. However, it is argued, the form and content of these struggles must “follow the rules” and not harm the idea of the university as a place of objectivity

and neutrality. Those (gender/queer students and scholars) who resist by exercising their academic freedom encounter a double-bind discourse. On the one hand, university management may recognise the relevance of the topic. On the other hand, it is systematically argued that arguments need to be mediated in another way, in a different genre, with other content. In short, the *articulation* of their agenda is wrong, and their bodies are out of place.

The issue, then, is not the presence of neoconservative voices within the university but the defence of a social order regulated by following rules that are constructed as being beyond the political. The regulation of what can be done, where, and by whom, along with the meaning of that doing and the epistemological consequences of those meanings, transforms the struggle for feminist/queer/postcolonial knowledge in ways that allow little space for discussing what is important and whose side the university is on. Societal conflicts, from racism to heteronormativity, are managed through bureaucratisation strategies to be discussed at the next board meeting, in a newly created committee, and so on. Central to this strategy is the shift (and the associated appropriation) away from those who resist (of queer, migrant background) towards those representing the norm.

In conclusion, having identified depoliticisation as a decidedly political process, we consider it a matter of urgency that critical scholars should interrupt and challenge this anti-democratic transformation of the meaning of laws, policies, and concepts that threatens to undermine our universities. As critical scholars, we also believe there is an urgent need to participate in this meaning-making. In a time of necropolitics, doing work that matters means devising scholarships of hope and protecting and recreating the political to shape an agenda for living together in this world within many worlds.

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