

# “Better stories” in higher education

**Cunning strategies for gender studies:  
What can you do when nothing can be done?  
Can the hangman be an ally of gender studies?**

by **Andrea Pető**

**T**he contemporary moment in which we find ourselves is shaped by environmental destruction, political polarization, structural and other forms of violence, and the transformation of liberal democracy into autocracies of different forms. This explains the predominance of apocalyptic visions and doomsday scenarios in contemporary political discourse and media. We are all tired, exhausted, hopeless, and depressed. In discussions in university cafeterias faculty is complaining about lack of funding, the uncooperative and demanding administration, and uncooperative students. The stories of success and joy that we feel after an enlightening discussion with colleagues and students are rarely happening. Moreover, the lack of new analytical tools to understand the new development also contributes to confusion. The hijacking of feminist discourse, vocabulary, and institutions by forces who empty and instrumentalize the hard-won achievements of equality politics is painful and confusing.

Unfortunately, this kind of “grim storytelling” is typically also utilized in exclusionary, racist, (hetero)sexist ways to instigate fear and insecurity and to propagate increasingly repressive nationalist politics. At the same time, “grim storytelling” plays a major role in the social sciences where the response to the contemporary state of the world has often been to focus on decline, suffering, collapse, and conflict.

**CAN WE MOVE** beyond pessimistic frameworks while at the same time developing new tools to understand and transform the social, political, and environmental challenges that we face in Europe and beyond? What are the consequences of “grim storytelling” dominating these realms and, increasingly, the aesthetic realm as well? What possibilities could be opened up by “better stories” of political, academic, and aesthetic interventions that offer affective, embodied, and transformative alternatives? By

asking such questions, this paper seeks to explore, understand, and make visible the livable – that is, real and acceptable – alternatives to the “grim stories” of the present.

**MY ATTEMPT TO** move away from “grim stories” is even more important as I am three times loser as a gender studies professor at CEU.<sup>1</sup> My academic field, gender studies, was deleted from the accredited study list without consultation.<sup>2</sup> CEU was forced to move from one EU member country to another to preserve its academic freedom. And thirdly, I had to resign from the Hungarian Accreditation Committee as the President of the Committee demanded that I should withdraw my peer-reviewed academic article from the otherwise less publicly known German academic journal *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte*.<sup>3</sup> By now this article about illiberal academic authorization has become the most-read article in the journal. This unwanted recognition or as Eric Fassin calls it, “paradoxical recognition” created a political opportunity to share my ideas with the widest possible audience.

This paper is based on two arguments: First, “grim storytelling” only gives access to part of the story and therefore needs to be supplemented with “better stories” – stories that generate an understanding of human potentiality, creativity, resilience, interconnectedness and shared “vulnerability”.<sup>4</sup> Second, the tendency towards “grim storytelling” in critical social sciences constitutes a major limitation for the possibilities of imagining and enacting the very transformations that Europe most urgently needs in order to enhance the European project. In her critique of “dark anthropology”, Sherry Ortner succinctly asks: “What is the point of opposing neo-liberalism if we cannot imagine better ways of living and better futures?”<sup>5</sup> That is why it is important that the alternative tools of knowledge production and practices of political engagement, which are already being put into effect in various activist communities throughout Eu-



rope and beyond, become more visible. It is equally important to translate these alternative tools of knowledge production and political engagement into a methodology with which they can be made more intelligible in terms of their possibilities for transformative politics on a larger scale. To this end, a reconsideration of the potential of critical social science praxis is urgently required. The precondition of critical social science praxis is academic freedom.

**ACADEMIC FREEDOM IS KEY** for formulating and telling these “better stories”, as “the better story, as the principle of creation and surviving difficult experience, is also the principle of how people collectively share a story to survive better”.<sup>6</sup> Education is a space where this “collective sharing” of “better stories” is happening. This story can be a literature piece or history or a family story

or your own story. This sharing of collective stories is a powerful tool to fight against grim storytelling.<sup>7</sup> This article shares my personal experiences and theoretical and strategic insights about how gender studies can survive and flourish during illiberal attacks.

## Defining the new threat to gender studies and academic freedom

In order to resist, we first need to know what danger we are facing when gender studies experience threats, delegitimization, anti-intellectualism, and hijacking of its language. With Weronika Grzebalska, we call these newly built states *illiberal polypore* states, based on their common modus operandi.<sup>8</sup> The polypore is a parasitic pore fungus that lives on wood and produces nothing but more polypores. Unlike political scientists who admire the effectiveness of these illiberal states destroying democratic institutions,<sup>9</sup> we argue that polypore states do not have original ideas; rather, they take the ideas of others and use them for their own purpose: self-maintenance of their own separate world. Past authoritarian regimes took over existing scientific institutions and transformed them into explicitly ideological institutions such as research institutes of Communist Party history or race hygiene. By contrast, polypore institutions mask themselves as “real” academic institutions, i.e. as “one of them”.<sup>10</sup> The polypore not only creates parallel institutions but also weakens already existing infrastructure and discredits its activities. The illiberal state also systematically destroys any other existing mechanisms of scientific evaluation, turning emptied institutions into performative formalities, rendering them mere simulacra of the original institutions. Polypore and state institutions with the same profile differ, in that the available state funding for the polypore institutions seems limitless, now that funds from other state institutions are being pumped into the state-financed polypore institutions, leading to those state-funded institutions’ further impoverishment.

My personal story also illustrates that attacks on academic freedom are not happening in “faraway countries we know so little” (to paraphrase Chamberlain when he signed the deal with Hitler hoping to save the peace) but already inside European Union. Recent developments inside the EU and in countries like

Denmark and Sweden, which previously pioneered academic freedom and institutionalization of gender studies, also prove that academic freedom is not a given but a space of negotiation.

How come the different professional organizations, institutions, and the EU itself were so unprepared for this paradigm change in knowledge production and dissemination? Because that is what I am arguing the attack on academic freedom is. This sleepwalking is the concept we are using in our podcast series hosted by the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre.

## “PAST AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES TOOK OVER EXISTING SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTIONS AND TRANSFORMED THEM INTO EXPLICITLY IDEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS.”

Four historians of the Holocaust, including myself, are discussing what can we learn from the past to recognize similarities and differences as far as attacks on liberal values are concerned.<sup>11</sup> Illiberalism is not a new phenomenon: European modernity has always operated with exclusion, colonialism, and othering. This dark legacy has never disappeared, but progressive actors misread its non-visibility as its absence. The sleepwalking is brutally ended by the poly-crisis when all the mistakes and consequences of neoliberalization, including transforming universities to conveyor belt-like knowledge transfer businesses, came to light. As one of the responses to this poly-crisis some groups were capturing the state and using the resources collected from the citizens of the state for their own purpose.

**THIS IS A CRUCIAL PART** of this paradigm change: the new relationship with the state. The belief in the state and its institutions is unquestionable but countries that went through neoliberalization, which fundamentally weakened state institutions with the slogan of excellence and economic efficiency, created a state which is strong for the strong and weak for the weak, which means that the state decides who are the worthy citizens, whom they serve. And higher education has also transformed in this process: the percentage of public higher educational institutions decreased. The whole of Hungarian higher education was privatized in two weeks (!) which means losing autonomy and freedom to decide what to teach and how. The story of the CEU, a private university in Hungary now forced to move to Vienna, Austria from one EU member country to another, actually helps us to rethink whether only public universities could serve the public good. If the state is captured by mafia, and operates as a mafia group, a private university can serve as a beacon of academic freedom. That was the reason why CEU had to leave Hungary. Of course, this process is not only Orbanization; it is easy to pin structural changes, a paradigm change, onto one person, as it helps to normalize this disturbing paradigm change. This is

even dangerous as this illiberal state capture uses the hijacked neoliberal language of excellence, competitiveness, impact, social outreach, and indices – as do proxy female leaders talking about women’s rights. This leads to another feature that led to sleepwalking: the concept of “illiberal pragmatism”, which means anything goes. If one argument does not work that is no problem, as they apply another which might be just the opposite of the first one. The content does not really matter. Intellectuals, scientists, and progressive politicians spend considerable time and energy on analyzing and understanding a phenomenon that is impossible to analyze and understand. That impossible task also contributes to exhaustion and depression among progressive forces.

### What can we do when nothing can be done, or should we ally with the hangman?

In this section, I discuss what can be done when seemingly nothing can be done. Brecht wrote in his 1935 piece, *Writing the Truth. Five Difficulties as follows*: “It takes courage to say that the good were defeated not because they were good, but because they were weak”.

In my academic work, I explore and analyze the question: Why are we so weak today even though we know that we are the good ones and have a vision of a better society and are able to tell “better stories”?<sup>12</sup> We are losing the hegemonic fight, which is not an unfortunate accident. The recent rise of illiberalism and neo-fascism is not a natural catastrophe, it has its reasons and causes. And even earthquakes can be forecast if one is attentive enough. During earthquakes, some well-built houses withstand the tremor, while others collapse. What has happened and what will happen with different gender studies programs globally is clear. The illiberal tactics are to restrict (through “bending” and “de-specification”), delegitimize (through “forging”), or, indeed, eliminate (through “breaking,” and possibly “de-specification”) gender studies programs.<sup>13</sup>

**IN MY WORK**, I am interested in the reason for our sleepwalking, for our ignorance of the causes and reasons that lead to our becoming weak. And I also want to understand how to put a stop to that: how to build edifices, in this case spaces of critical knowledge production, that resist earthquakes. We can only stop sleepwalking with a culture that comes from education as a site of sharing “better stories”. Education matters because if we fail, we sleepwalk into a situation as we have in the case of Russia. In the past decades, several warning signs were raised about Russian higher education which were ignored even though they served as blueprints for transforming research and education globally. The moment arrived in 2022 when education will not be enough anymore, and only real weapons and sacrificing human lives can stop evil. Education can only create the culture

necessary for ending sleepwalking if academics and researchers are able to speak the truth, to quote Brecht again, in a way that can be heard. The present academic evaluation system with nontransparent impact factors and managerial teaching deliverables does not encourage us to tell the truth. And especially not for a wider audience. That many progressive and critical thinkers failed to speak the truth in a way that can be listened to and understood by many led to the current series of overlapping crises. One such crisis resides in the fact that academia and higher education became a warzone, of which gender studies is the first battlefield.<sup>14</sup> Whatever happens with gender studies, it will influence the future of higher education, and the ways in which knowledge is produced, shared, and evaluated. I disagree with the claim that changing this self-centeredness of academia would be hopeless, but it is more challenging now in a hostile environment. Let me quote Brecht again: “Even the hangmen can be addressed when the payment for hanging stops, or when the work becomes too dangerous”. Even the hangman can be recruited at the right historical moment but only if we are cunning enough to recognize the historical moment and proceed in a way that can be attractive – even for the hangman. It is not enough to simply do our job anymore, we need to be “cunning”, again using Brecht’s adjective, because the institutional framework we blindly trusted to safeguard the values we hold dear is no longer protecting us but is captured by illiberal forces. The new means of communication which were meant to disseminate ideas of freedom and be available for everybody are constructing vulnerable, exploited, and hateful individuals, the unashamed citizens

who were behind different horrific events in human history. The discussion about academic freedom often falls into the dark hole of what others and other institutions should be doing instead of asking the question of what we can do as academics in higher education.

The first strategy is from the folk tale entitled “Smart girl”, when the King orders the girl to visit him, bringing a present and not bringing a present, clothed and not clothed, otherwise he

will execute her. To translate this to an academic context: to participate and not participate, resist but not resist, driven by the imperative to survive. The ambiguity of responses offers space for survival and helps to avoid the confrontation she knows she will lose to the much more powerful enemy. And when you are losing even survival is an achievement.

The second is the normalization of what is actually not normal: Saying it is ok, look on the bright side, do not politicize, just avoid the confrontation. Normalization is an interiorized strategy of the illiberal state which secures the passivity of the individuals.

The third strategy is hiding in an academic ivory tower (objective science) and using technocratic academic language to avoid anything which may be called political. As progressive forces lost the hegemonic fight over defining the meaning of what

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politics is, the discussion of academia being at all political is a non-winnable discussion for progressive and critical studies. As a response, claiming that returning to objective science can save critical social sciences and humanities is a mistake.

The fourth option is creating alternative institutions, exercising the politics of separation which worked very well during communism in Eastern Europe. Havel's concept of "anti-politics" suggested non-participation in politics, in a sphere where both now and back then an overpowering state is controlling the resources. As an alternative, building up alternative, nonformal organizations and movements was suggested, as informality makes policing difficult.

### How can academic gender studies resist in an illiberal polypore state?

When the state is captured and the illiberal discourse becomes hegemonic, best practices from the past can come in handy. I am inspired by the work of David J. McQuoid-Mason in apartheid South-Africa.<sup>15</sup> He invented the concept of "street law" instead of human rights and built up an educational network that contributed to the fall of the apartheid regime and also became the foundation of the new South Africa.

In comparison to South Africa during apartheid, this new illiberal polypore state has three functional characteristics: the establishment of parallel institutions, and familial and security discourse, all of them gendered. Policy-related questions are presented as security questions. According to its rhetoric, a vigilant government will defeat the threats posed by the EU, the UN, migrants, gender studies professionals, George Soros, etc. The security discourse also affects narratives concerning science policies. It has become routine to call scientists and academics "enemies of the nation" and to personally intimidate scientists who disagree with government policies.<sup>16</sup>

**IN THIS CONTEXT** – when women are not considered citizens in their own right, but only in the familialist discourse – there are still places to resist. Visible and not visible faculty and staff are doing the right things at the right moment: "cunningly" building networks and building resilience. As the illiberal forces capture institutions, our strength is in these invisible networks, thanks to which resistance can come from unexpected places.

Here are some suggestions:

- Strengthening your guild: join a professional organization and strengthen your professional network. The professional network is not your family, you do not need to love and agree with all members, but you should share the basic principles of professional ethics. That firm value is already a blow to "illiberal pragmatism".
- Use your academic authorization to impress and achieve your aims. The new illiberal polypore institutions hack academic authorization systems to undermine professional values and at the same time they build up their parallel system of authorization in order to use it in the hegemonic fight. Do not shy away from using your titles and credentials when participating in public debates and publishing open ads.

- Think carefully about when and how to engage in public discussion as these debates are not about solving issues but rather the debate as a genre is used to disseminate and normalize very problematic ideas. Engage in debates about gender studies but NOT in a framework of "for and against", but rather about issues to be solved with the research coming from gender studies.
- Avoid technical language and terms in English. Illiberal science wins because it uses populist methods: addressing a wider, nonprofessional audience in a popular, understandable language. Try to do the same to speak about very complex issues in understandable language.
- The illiberal takeover is a legal counterrevolution that uses legal methods in order to create an alternative legal framework. The best allies are lawyers as they know that professional credibility is at stake, not only the concrete issue.
- Line up with a few influencers to support you and support you on social media.
- Your classroom and your lecture hall are your space. Using it strategically is shaping the research agenda.
- Use existing organizations and their resources in higher education and academia for your purpose.
- Use existing laws and discourses of "country X is pioneering in human rights" for your purpose and as a threat of PR disasters.
- Illiberal regimes work with conflicts partly because academics are not very combatant and partly because debates are ways of putting forward and normalizing their ideas. Conflict is good (debate, reporting, denunciations, etc.) if you know how to use this political opportunity.
- Accept that some of your colleagues are not your allies. They may have other agendas, being short-sighted or just tired at the moment. Do not offend them but keep the door always open by keeping them in the loop.
- Be ready to be listed as a traitor to the nation and use social media for your purpose and tweet #theOtherHungary showing an example and an alternative.
- Be present on social media and make sure you stay safe. If you receive threats, react already to the first threat, immediately contacting the police and demanding that they do their job. If they do not, post about it.
- Pick a fight you can win on your own terms; do not waste energy on reacting because that is how polypore states with seemingly inexhaustible resources operate. Silence and nonaction can be as powerful as going to the streets!

### Conclusion

I argue in this paper that fighting against academic freedom and gender studies, and controlling what is taught and how, is an essential and constitutive part of the illiberal turn. This is not a temporary backlash but a fundamentally new development in the science policy of illiberal regimes. It cannot be fought with the vague promise of success by normalization or calling it a temporary backlash. More importantly, there are no "good old times" of science policy to return to because the neo-liberal-

ization of the academic landscape has already fundamentally changed scientific knowledge production and communication. Over-bureaucratized neoliberal universities and their impact factor-driven, conveyor belt-style mass teaching are products of a bygone area. They are no longer able to create spaces for responsible, critical thinkers and their modus operandi makes the whole critical knowledge production vulnerable.<sup>17</sup> Illiberal science policy has a long-term impact on academic authority: if the state supports the “troll science” with taxpayers’ money and all its quality assurance institutions are based on institutions and systems of academic authority, “troll science” becomes “real science”. Indeed, that is at stake in building up an alternative, parallel science system. Still, the impact factors and international journals, as sites of professional solidarity, are the only tools available to discredit, marginalize and defeat illiberal forces. First, the problems and then threats need to be identified in order to find strategies and tactics to resist and to build a new higher education that matches the requirements of the poly-crisis.

**IN THE NEAR FUTURE**, what can be expected (if this has not happened yet) is that syllabi are controlled, free applications are advertised on campus to report teachers on your cell phone, and video surveillance systems are being installed in classrooms. An interesting example of an adaptation strategy, the so-called “Smart Girl”-strategy, can be observed among gender studies scholars who are now continuing their same research under the umbrella of “family studies” instead of gender studies. New disciplines like family studies are replacing gender studies first in Russia, then in Hungary and Poland, thus demonstrating the impact of polypore science policy on science.

As we pointed out in our global survey with Ergas et al., “though repressions initiated by the state authorities may lead to the suspension of the programs, it does not mean a complete end of gender studies – it may prompt a further interest among prospective applicants and lead to the decentralization of the neoliberal university and make it more accessible to the public through alternative hubs of knowledge offered through resistance movements. As existing gender studies centers have been weakened or altogether eliminated, for example by policies of *breaking*, *bending* and *de-specification*, scholars have continued to focus on gender in other sites, including universities in exile and informal academies, and to disseminate and debate their work through networks of scholarly exchange.” This will be a long fight, not a sprint but a marathon and to close with Dina Georgis: “[...] if there is no final story, if the story never ends, there is always a better story than the better story”.<sup>18</sup> ✖

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Note: Andrea Pető was awarded an honorary doctorate by Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden. This text is a reworked and elaborated version based on the talk “Why Do Universities and Academic Freedom Matter?”, that she held when the award was presented on September 15, 2022.

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