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Academic Freedom and the Assimilation of Critique: On Gender Studies and the Outside Within

Christina Chiotaki
Utrecht University
chrischiotaki@gmail.com

Abstract
This essay examines the relationship between academic freedom, critique and the neoliberal university through the example of Gender Studies. Drawing on anarchist and abolitionist thought, it examines how critique becomes institutionalised through professionalisation and self-reflexive forms of knowledge production. Through practices of reflexivity, positionality and ethnographic engagement with movements and marginalised communities, Gender Studies incorporate resistant knowledges into the university's mechanisms of critique and legitimacy, assimilating them into its institutional processes of self-critique. At the same time, this instability opens the possibility for a different understanding of institutional resistance. Drawing on post-anarchist theory, the paper proposes understanding Gender Studies not as a space either internal or external to the university, but as a contradictory and unstable "outside within" the institution itself. Ultimately, this paper calls for a form of critique that resists institutional assimilation and recognises the breaking points already emerging within the university.

Keywords
Academic Freedom, Gender Studies, Critical Studies, Anarchist Theory, Undercommons, Abolitionism, Feminism

Introduction

This essay emerges from the recognition of the active part that universities have played in resistance movements historically. Gender Studies particularly arose from this exact positionality of the Western university, maintaining a relationship to movements and communities outside institutional boundaries while simultaneously existing within them (Haque, 2019). This distinct institutional and political location makes Gender Studies an especially productive site with which to examine the tensions of the capitalist, colonial and neoliberal university. This paper thinks through the multiple tensions that this scholarship occupies, as a field continuously attempting to hold space for deviance, deep questioning and inclusivity within institutions that are themselves structured through hierarchy, exclusion and professionalisation. As will be explored, Gender Studies have been attacked exactly because of this positionality, especially in contemporary times of anti-gender politics, increasing repression and censorship. At the same time, however, this repression can also produce a certain institutional self-righteousness. Academic freedom is examined within this lens, moving beyond the traditional calls for academic freedom in the face of repression and instead questioning what role Gender Studies specifically, and Critical Studies more broadly, have played in legitimising the institution on which they perform critique. This paper aims to inhabit this tension. Drawing on abolitionist and anarchist thought, it argues that the relationship between the university and what Harney and Moten (2004) conceptualise as the Undercommons can no longer be understood through a simple distinction between inside and outside. The final purpose of this paper, then, is to call for a new reflexivity capable of facing the discomfort of this dual positionality in a way that is productive for the forms of resistance that the movements we speak for, with and within continue to call for.

The subject of academic freedom

In order to approach the limits of how academic freedom and institutional critique are typically framed within the university, this paper turns to anarchist theory. Anarchist scholar David Graeber points to the absence of anarchist thought within the university. He argues that power relations are mostly studied as an issue outside of the university, whereas the hierarchies and dynamics that structure academic freedom remain unquestioned, and as such hidden in the power relation discourse (Graeber, 2009, p. 103). Writing from the position of the anthropologist, Graeber contrasts the clarity of power relations during fieldwork with the hazy, naturalised hierarchies inside the university. While in the former, relations of domination are clearly identified, leading to repercussions taken from the institutions, the latter relations, as unrecognised, remain unaccounted for. Interestingly, his analysis focuses on practices that claim to account for these exact dynamics, the processes of supposed horizontality which are becoming increasingly popular in Western universities and are seen as a key practice against strict hierarchies and unidimensional decision processes, encouraging cooperation and accountability (Graeber, 2009, pp. 104–105). These processes, however, remain open to interpretation by design; collectivised decision-making spaces, such as departmental meetings, like all collective spaces, are dependent on participants to decide how they will engage with one another. Participants decide whether they will approach discussion through consensus and collective responsibility in mind, or if they will engage through debate, aiming at persuading the majority to direct itself towards specific interests instead of the best collective solution. The university, however, as a hierarchical institution and, most importantly, a workplace structured through competing interests, leaves no space for thinking in regards to a collective, but instead encourages the latter form of conduct. Under these conditions, horizontality acquires a procedural character which puts its transformative aim in question.

These processes already point to the same tension theorised by anarchists approaching the academy. What Graeber's point makes clear is how practices stemming from grassroots organising get assimilated in a manner which reproduces the university's direction towards absorption of said practices and their corruption within its space. However, the

introduction of such practices within it, makes academia already a space of heightened flexibility compared to other institutions; as Peter Gelderloos points out, 'The university is intended to be a relatively liberated space within the framework of domination.' (2009, p. 1). This idea of the relatively 'free' university is mirrored in the very debates on academic freedom and, this paper argues, actually guides the conversation. Especially in spaces of gender studies, feminist scholarship and, admittedly, more already politicised studies, this presupposition becomes clear in arguments for the protection and advancement of academic freedom. For gender studies scholar Judith Butler, the university has a responsibility to uphold academic freedom, especially in times of repression and public outcry, as a value which is inherent to democracy and its values (2022, pp. 408–409). Butler makes their point through tracing contemporary examples of far right governments and conservative institutions in Europe and the United States which build political and social consensus through attacking critical studies (2022, pp. 411–413).

Prevalent post-humanist and feminist new materialist theorist Rosi Braidotti goes as far as to claim universities as distinct places for agency to be exercised, a 'statement of freethinking and a political gesture of resistance' (2008, p. 6) especially in times of far-right insurgence and governmental attacks on academics. These arguments are politically urgent and grounded on material struggle. Yet, they also rely, to some extent, on interpreting the university through the state's own accusations against it. Reactionary attacks against critical scholarship are thus read as evidence of the university's (or, at least, of parts of it) oppositional status. This reading of the university, then, partially follows the state's own narrative about it – at this point, the question of an anti-state reading arises justifiably. Anarchist thought offers one possible route into such a reading. Apart from its critique to the state, Anarchist theory raises another point of questioning that remains unresolved in the previous approaches: the continued investment in democracy as both the horizon and the justification of critique. Even when theorists locate exclusions and violences within democracy, democracy itself remains positioned as an unquestioned ideal. But what happens if, following post-colonial and black critique[1], we understand these forms of violence as constitutive to democracy? This shift moves the conversation away from reformist techniques and toward abolitionist thought.

Under a neoliberal, individualistic and profit-oriented system, the university is framed by abolitionist scholars as another institution reproducing domination regardless of its claims to inclusivity. Harney and Moten claim that the university will always hover above the lower classes, what they refer to as the 'Undercommons', only incorporating them conditionally and in ways that reaffirm their exclusion (2004, p. 104). As such, the Undercommons are the constitutive outside of the university. Their analysis gives a name to the tension identified previously in this paper: the contradiction of defending democracy while refusing to recognise oppression as one of its constitutive effects. In their theory, highlighting the importance of the exclusion of the Undercommons in the making of the university, what becomes clear is how this democratic institution, alike the rest of democratic institutions, functions precisely through exclusion. The neutralisation of critique's emancipatory power follows, in the same pathway that collective practices did in Graeber's account. Harney and Moten build on this point, explaining how the university possesses the distinct ability of turning critique into a professional venture, a process they describe as 'professionalisation' (2004, p. 106). Through professionalisation, critical scholars are able to deconstruct systemic, capitalist, colonial practices, while leaving the state's capitalistic potential intact. In this framework, critique does not threaten the institution it addresses, but instead becomes one of the mechanisms through which said institution is legitimised. Through their increasing institutionalisation, critical discourses have become integral to the contemporary professional subject and in a sense representative of the concept of

[1] See, for example, the writings of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois and their arguments on the connections between colonialism and Western Democracy.

professionalisation. In this process, critical academics are also, themselves, professionalised; they perform negligence, questioning objects of knowledge while ignoring the labour and exclusion behind them (Harney & Moten, 2004, pp. 111–112). As such, Critical Scholarship and its perpetrators are seen as an exceptionally aligned sector in the reproduction and legitimisation of the university.

Gender Studies: the onto-auto-encyclopedia, or the anarchist outside?

When applied to the Gender Studies example, Harney and Moten's account of critical studies seems to encounter some important limits. Arising from conversations with the feminist movement (Haque, 2019), Gender Studies are perhaps the epistemological tradition most preoccupied with the self and its implications. Questions of positionality, identity, embeddedness and reflexivity dominate feminist scholarship. In Gender Studies classrooms, students are called to confront their own implication in their writings, to document their affective responses, to use the first person and to make positionality statements as part of feminist methodology. Gender Studies are concerned exactly with the roots of knowledge: they point to its colonial past and how it reproduces colonial dynamics, diligently researching the connections, connotations and meanings hidden within practices portrayed in a critical light. They move continuously inside and beyond themselves, developing increasingly advanced understandings even of their own implication in the oppression they study. Moreover, Gender Studies operate on this level through calling out to, integrating and claiming to speak with what Harney and Moten describe as the Undercommons, the "teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments ..." (2004, p. 104). The university, then, does not simply exclude marginal knowledges, but increasingly incorporates them into its own mechanisms of critique and legitimacy.

Furthermore, this practice of self-reflection complicates what the thinkers, following Derrida, called 'onto-auto-encyclopedic' knowledge (Harney & Moten, 2004, p. 107), an integral part of the contemporary neoliberal university. In their account, the onto-auto-encyclopedic subject is the university itself, which continuously produces itself as knowledge. The self becomes both the object, and guarantor of critique. This form of knowledge production, then, serves to further legitimise the university as the system which both produces, but also, and maybe most importantly, *guards* knowledge. In this sense, Gender Studies, through their self-reflexive and integrative practices complicate this account even further, through positioning the Undercommons as onto-auto-encyclopedic subjects themselves. This new subject is clearly exemplified through the methodology of Feminist ethnography (or ethnographic fieldwork). This approach remains central to critical studies and, more broadly, to the humanities and social sciences, a method which arises from the exact question of the self and the recognition of the self in relation to others. Feminist ethnographic research examines positionality in relation to the researcher, the ethnographer. As we read in Davis and Craner's highly cited work, 'a key aspect of feminist ethnographic inquiry is the interrogation of one's positionality, how one is situated in relation to participants in their work' (2016, p. 111). Returning to David Graeber's account of ethnography in combination with Otia Kolov's account of the academic spy, we face the tension of this new onto-auto-epistemology. In her book *Academic Spies: Institutional research and the Movement as its Subject* (2024), the pseudonymous anarchist author Otia Kolov conceptualises the academic spy based on their meeting point with the Undercommons through fieldwork. She explains how researchers function in a utilitarian manner, 'stealing' the intellectual work and insider information of movements in a way which both exposes them to the system and in tandem gives the researcher the glory of this knowledge, translating into academic praise and consequent positions in the academy (2024, p. 14). In Graeber's conceptualisation, ethnography can pose a tool which can be used from the Undercommons themselves, as a form of research which helps them figure out the system, read the enemy deeply and in this sense understand their target and mold their praxis better (2009, p. 111).

This comparison brings up another tension in the conversation of the Undercommons as an outside: through positioning ethnographic research both as a tool against movements and as a tool for them, the relationship between academic research and its supposed outsider becomes even more complicated.

The tensions examined throughout this paper ultimately return to a central problem in anarchist theory: the question of an outside to institutional power. If contemporary universities are increasingly capable of incorporating critique, including critiques of their own exclusions, violences and contradictions, then the possibility of a stable exterior to the institution becomes difficult to conceptualise. The Undercommons can no longer be understood as a purely separate space resisting institutional assimilation. This instability is exactly what post-anarchist theory seeks to address. Saul Newman explains how all anarchist attempts to locate such an outside have repeatedly encountered their own limits (2001, p. 137). Whether through appeals to a state of nature as an outside, or through post-structuralist conceptions of a diffuse, all-encompassing system, the possibility of a clearly identified exterior to the system remained a tension point for anarchist theory.

Newman took upon the same task himself, theorising an outside in the hazy boundaries of this all-encompassing, invasive power. Drawing on Lacan's concept of the Real, he conceptualises a space existing at the same time within and outside this system (Newman, 2001, p. 142). In Lacanian theory, the Real represents the void that arises from the discontinuity between the Symbolic and the Imaginary that subjects construct themselves on. This concept becomes central to post-anarchist theory: posed between the unlimited desire and its inevitable unfulfillment, the Real creates a new space that is unattainable and, as such, cannot be neither filled nor identified as something specific. It resists the idea of totality and signification and exposes the multiplicity of the subjects (Newman, 2001, p. 139). Thus, the outside that post-anarchism creates is more so an 'absence', a void that cannot be filled by power – as such, it is a radical outside (Newman, 2001, p. 142). The post-anarchist subject is constantly open to new identities and consequently never fully takes on any single one, leading it to reject the concept of identity itself, performing the void of the Real. Post-anarchists argue, then, that absence of concrete meaning is exactly what allows subjects to resist. Through recognising the multiplicity of identities in a subject as a creation of a lack, of an absence, one questions the omnipotence of power. In this question, the subject that the Power must control in order to legitimise itself rejects any concrete inscription, resulting in the Power's inability to recognise it and, as such, the inability to control it.

Concluding: Gender studies towards abolition

When translating this concept of an outside to an institutional department, the approach gets inevitably more slippery. This paper aims to make the case for Gender Studies as a space inhabiting a form of outside within the institution, although not inherently, like the anarchist readings of the self, but only as a space for the possibility of this outside, a possible breaking point. As examined throughout this paper, Gender studies pose a distinct case of critical studies, assuming a political positionality of radical critique, always evolving and moving in on itself and outside of it. This look inwards makes it a field which performs multiplicity, resisting specific identities and constantly being open to new interpretations which the field itself will produce and integrate. In a post-structuralist reading, through officially occupying this ambiguous space, the space of critique, Gender Studies, adversely, owns - or, in the spirit of its constant transformation, will own – the means to disarm the institution that it lends legitimacy to. It could be argued, in the same sense, that every field could perform this disarmament, as they all occupy a position inside the university; this paper, however, argues that Gender Studies specifically, through turning critique back onto themselves and incorporating the Undercommons as argued above, already occupy the space of possibility for this outside. As such, Gender Studies can be viewed as a toolbox towards enacting this outside.

Indeed, scholars working within increasingly neoliberal universities have already opted to create tools for survival and resistance towards an institution which is consistently intensifying their surveillance, precarity, budget cuts and its ties with militaristic control and genocide. Such work examines how the university fragments and organises time in order to maximise productivity, producing a system of self-surveillance based on the internalisation of this productivity from scholars themselves (Mountz et al., 2015, pp. 1242–1243). In response, scholars talk of practices that disrupt the university's goal-oriented temporalities, of slowing down collectively and prioritising relational tasks instead of tasks that have a direct output in institutional terms (Olivieri, 2022, pp. 109–111). This scholarship is important to this paper's argument, as self-care and slowness are presented as modes of resistance to the neoliberal university, aiming to instrumentalise the privileged positionality of academics in order to challenge power upward in the hierarchy of the university. Furthermore, it starts from the theoretical points that acquire a critique of the university's functionality instead of only its effects, already looking for a way to disarm the institution. As we read in Riccitelli, a big part of this resistance to the university is what she calls, borrowing from Cech (2021), the 'passion principle', referring to scholars' internalisation of productivity through the framing of academic labour as passion instead of work (Riccitelli, 2025, p. 474). Otia Kolov (2024) captures this passion and its centrality in academia even more directly. Reflecting on the interrelations and hierarchies between professors, PhD students and master's students, she closes with "Romanticism is an inherent part of academia. Otherwise, you give up. But naivety must have its limits."(Kolov, 2024, p. 72). This romanticism, the idea of the university itself as a space for resistance, is what the scholarship aiming to resist the neoliberal university is already pointing to.

However, it is not enough to occupy this space in regards to the struggle of paid positions within the university. As Kolov points out, this romanticism sustains the university machine precisely because it deludes all of its participants into productivity. Students and aspiring academics, occupying a particularly precarious position, present an even deeper ambiguity, an outsider position which nevertheless remains within the university. Following the layers and the possibilities for the enaction of this outside within, this paper instead argues for a rethinking of the Undercommons as both within and outside the university, as a radical outside especially possible within Gender Studies. The Undercommons, then, should instead be understood as emerging through these unstable and contradictory positions within the university, positions that carry the potential not only to reform the university, but, following abolitionist thought, to exceed it entirely. Gender Studies, through their constant movement inward toward their own contradictions and outward toward forms of resistance, occupy a particularly significant position within this tension. As such, they emerge as a particularly fertile space for this outside, and, consequently, a space for the Undercommons, which, as explained above, they already are part of. The political task, then, is to move beyond academic freedom, into critique that resists assimilation. Following abolitionist thought, the task becomes to recognise and inhabit the breaking points already emerging within the university.

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