

GETTING THE BEST OF “UNWANTED RECOGNITION”

Andrea Pető

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© Andrea Pető

PhD, Professor at the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University, Vienna, Austria

Research Affiliate of the CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest

E-mail: petoa@ceu.edu

ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-7525-2582

Abstract: This article examines systematic attacks on Gender Studies as part of broader anti-gender campaigns within illiberal states, using the personal experience at Central European University as a case study. When Gender Studies was deleted from Hungary's accredited study list in 2017 without consultation, CEU was forced to relocate from Budapest to Vienna in 2020, demonstrating how attacks on academic freedom occur within EU member states rather than distant authoritarian regimes. These attacks transform Gender Studies into “popular science”, where politicians and public intellectuals make authoritative statements without relevant training, paradoxically occurring during renewed public trust in scientific expertise following the pandemic. Illiberal states exploit neoliberal evaluation systems, replacing international peer-reviewed journals with pro-government local publications and reorienting scientific discourse from the Global North toward Russia and China — a twisted form of decolonization that reduces democratic inclusivity.

The article argues that European scientific infrastructure remains unprepared for illiberal scientific institutions that appear legitimate but operate fraudulently using neoliberal language of excellence and impact. Resistance strategies include finding alternative sites for knowledge production, redefining scholarly identities, constituting support networks, and mobilizing internationally.

Keywords: gender studies, illiberal higher education policy, polypore state.



I am probably the best person to write the report as I am three times a loser as a Gender Studies professor at Central European University. In my academic field, Gender Studies were deleted from the accredited study list in Hungary in 2017 without consultation. CEU was forced to move from one EU member country to another to preserve its academic freedom. In the summer of 2020, more than 300 faculty and staff and 1200 students moved from Budapest to Vienna. Third, I had to resign from the Hungarian Accreditation Committee in 2022 as its President demanded that I withdraw my peer-reviewed academic article from the otherwise less publicly known German academic journal of *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Pető 2021). By now, this article about illiberal academic authorization has become the most-read article in the journal. This process, which Eric Fassin calls “paradoxical recognition”, created a political opportunity to share relevant ideas with the broadest possible audience (Fassin 2016).

My personal story also illustrates that attacks on academic freedom are not happening in “faraway countries we know so little”, to paraphrase Chamberlain when they signed the deal with Hitler hoping to save the peace before the Second World War, but already here and now. These systematic and systemic attacks on Gender Studies are part of anti-gender campaigns associated with the anti-gender movement, a nationalist, neoconservative response to the poly crisis (migration, financial and security, war in Europe and the Middle East) induced by the global, neoliberal world order. It uses “gender as symbolic glue” to create alliances of hate and exclusion, to redefine what is “normal”, and to create livable, desirable alternatives for voters to liberal democracy (Pető 2020). It also uses neoliberal managerial tools to silence critical voices, often using the slogan of free speech and academic freedom. These illiberal movements, while attacking Gender Studies as an academic discipline, are gaining much support everywhere. This war is waged in higher education over liberal values, and illiberal forces also hijack free speech and academic freedom discourse to eliminate critical spaces together with public higher education.

The “gender academy” which is defined as the ensemble of institutions and scholars who have advanced critical knowledge variously focused on women’s, LGBTQI+, and gender generally (Ergas et al. 2022). It can – and, recently, increasingly has – become subject to marginalization, defunding, stigmatization, and even outright closure or de-facto silencing and expulsion. Based on a global survey, a typology was developed for how these critical educational and research spaces are eliminated with bending, forging, breaking, and de-specification. The *forging*, changes that break substantially with a mainstream consensus without necessarily challenging *the rule of law*,

like using existing institutions to eliminate the independence of the Gender Studies research unit. The *breaking* like banning Gender Studies outside the liberal legal consensus like deleting Gender Studies in Hungary from the accredited study list. The *bending* involves the reinterpretation or disabling of existing legislative constraints in ways that are not procedurally illegal but subvert/defy liberal democratic norms, like budget negotiations about GS, ending with leaving GS underfunded. By despecification, we understand the purposeful submersion, or redefinition, of Gender Studies into other programs — such as family studies, the rebranding, and submersion of Gender Studies into other programs, generally under different names, in ways that effectively empty them of critical import.

These four strategies do not happen without violence. Recently, Gender Studies scholars cannot complain about the lack of broader social interest in their work. Faculty members' email boxes are filled with emails inquiring about their research, invitations to public debates in different media outlets, and comments for the press. At the same time, Gender Studies scholars are targeted by online public harassment and have found themselves being listed by name as enemies of the nation on the front pages of national newspapers to silence and humiliate academics.

To resist, first, we need to know what danger we are facing when Gender Studies experience threats, delegitimization, anti-intellectualism, and hijacking of its language- despecification. With Weronika Grzebalska, we call these newly built states *illiberal polypore states*, based on their standard modus operandi (Grzebalska and Pető 2018). The polypore is a parasitic 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, we argue that polypore states do not have original ideas; instead, they take the ideas of others and use them for their purpose: self-maintenance of their separate world. Polypore institutions mask themselves as “real” academic institutions, i.e., “one of them”. The polypore creates parallel institutions, weakens 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. Think about despecification. Polypore and state institutions with the same profile differ. 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 further impoverishment of those state-funded institutions.

Due to the anti-gender campaign, Gender Studies' knowledge production has changed forever as Gender Studies has become a popular science. Politicians, public intellectuals, and even workers having breakfast in a bakery are making self-assured and authoritative public statements on professional issues such as sex education or the curriculum of master's studies without any knowledge or training in Gender Studies. This is happening, paradoxically, during the resurgence of the credibility of science and experts because of the global pandemic. This revival of trust in science has not remained undetected by illiberal actors, leading to illiberal state officials applying the very same toolkit of science in their fight against Gender Studies by citing a hodgepodge of surveys in an ad hoc manner, which allows them to undermine the relevance of gender research and its empirical findings, as well as the value and legitimacy of its scientific endeavors in general.

Illiberal states are developing parallel systems of academic authorization and systematically destroying other scientific evaluation mechanisms, turning higher education institutions into performative formalities and rendering them mere imitations of the original institutions. While the polypore illiberal state hacks quality assurance via accreditation committees, it also mimics the neo-liberalized scientific evaluation system of indices. In Poland, for example, during the recent modification of the evaluation system, international, peer-reviewed English language journals have been replaced on the list of required publications with local Polish journals, whose profiles and editorial boards are pro-government. During this hacking of the quality assurance system, the previous consensus on publishing in English in scientific journals has also been called into question. This signals a change in scientific orientation; instead of the Global North, scientific discourse now orients to the East, to Russia and China. This changing geopolitical focus is, paradoxically, implementing a twisted de-colonization of science, making it less democratic and inclusive. It instrumentalizes the post-colonial discourse and uses it for its hegemonic purpose. For Gender Studies, where the "Holy Grail" had been published among others in *Signs*, *Feminist Theory*, and *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, all those achievements have suddenly been made to disappear, which will have an impact on these journals too.

What can all those Gender Studies scholars do when their field, their work, and their publications are labeled not only worthless and useless but also dangerous, and they cannot or do not want to immigrate to where the shrinking global academic space will soon not offer academic employment anyway? As the authentic study of Gender Studies is blocked by the "science policy" of illiberal states and the study of family policy as a scientific endeavor and a professional

lifebelt has been established, many scholars have seemingly resurfaced as experts in family policy or family studies. This adaptation strategy is well-known to middle-aged intellectuals from the communist era: one may pursue a career and publish only *if* one is not openly against the regime.

The European scientific infrastructure was unprepared for the emergence of illiberal science policy and illiberal scientific institutions, which look like any other scientific institution but, in reality, are not. The Hungarian Accreditation Committee obtained its European license from ENQA after CEU was forced into exile and the two-year Master's program in Gender Studies was struck from the accredited study list. These illiberal institutions use the neoliberal language of excellence, competitiveness, impact, social outreach, and indices; however, they are all fraudulent and empty. One possible strategy has been bringing academic freedom measured by offering Gender Studies in the curriculum as an index in the neoliberal rankings, which would contribute to meaningful change and, more importantly, prevent the spread of illiberal governing practices in higher education.

Attacks on Gender Studies programs and scholars demonstrate their ability to resist and continue working. Illiberal states may use breaking, bending, forging, and despecification to undermine Gender Studies and limit the work of gender scholars, and we can detail forms of resistance. We have seen gender scholars find other sites and means of knowledge production and dissemination, redefine themselves to continue their research and teaching, constitute networks that can provide intellectual as well as practical and political support, and mobilize internationally as well as nationally to demonstrate that activist scholarship is an essential mode of scholarly engagement at a time of global crisis and domestic repression. So, unwanted recognition has advantages.

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