

Gender wars and cancel culture in academia: Umut Özkırmı in conversation with Laura Favaro

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/tekn.91032>

Received: August 14, 2023 • Accepted: April 1, 2024 • OPR

ENG Abstract. The Oxford English Dictionary defines cancel culture as «the action or practice of publicly boycotting, ostracizing, or withdrawing support from a person, institution, etc., thought to be promoting culturally unacceptable ideas». Though accurate, this definition is incomplete since cancel culture goes way beyond boycotting or ostracizing. It includes a wide spectrum of sanctions, spanning from public naming and shaming, censorship and job loss to intimidation and outright attacks in the form of verbal and physical abuse. This article discusses the mechanisms and negative impacts of cancel culture in academia by focusing on the case of Laura Favaro, who was 'cancelled' after publishing an article on the findings of her research on academia's 'gender wars'. The concerted attempts to silence certain – particularly feminist – perspectives on sex and gender have severe and wide-ranging implications for researchers and the scholarly endeavour as a whole, contributing to the toxic atmosphere created by the neoliberalisation of universities.

Keywords: censorship; feminism; neoliberal university; queer theory; transgender.

ES Guerras del género y cultura de la cancelación en la academia: Umut Özkırmı en conversación con Laura Favaro

Resumen. El Oxford English Dictionary define la cultura de la cancelación como «la acción o práctica de públicamente boicotear, condenar al ostracismo, o retirar el apoyo a una persona, institución, etc., que se considera estar promoviendo ideas culturalmente inaceptables». Aunque precisa, esta definición está incompleta ya que la cultura de la cancelación va mucho más allá del boicot o el ostracismo. Incluye un amplio espectro de sanciones, abarcando desde nombrar y avergonzar públicamente, censura y la pérdida de trabajo hasta intimidación y ataques directos en forma de abuso verbal y físico. Este artículo aborda los mecanismos e impactos negativos de la cultura de la cancelación en el mundo académico centrándose en el caso de Laura Favaro, que fue 'cancelada' después de publicar un artículo sobre los resultados de su investigación sobre las 'guerras del género' en la academia. Los intentos concertados de silenciar ciertas perspectivas sobre el sexo y el género – particularmente las feministas – tienen implicaciones graves y de amplio alcance para el personal investigador y el *cometido de la erudición* en su conjunto, contribuyendo a la atmósfera tóxica creada por la neoliberalización de las universidades.

Palabras clave: censura; feminismo; transgénero; teoría queer; universidad neoliberal.

Summary. 1. You're cancelled! 2. Why do they hate us so much? 3. Into the (battle)field. 4. Police your own. 5. No qualms in silencing people. 6. There cannot be a dialogue. 7. Academientia? 8. Authors' contribution statement. 9. Acknowledgements. 10. Statement of the use of LLM. 11. References. 12. Appendix.

How to cite: Favaro, Laura and Özkırmı, Umut (2024). Gender wars and cancel culture in academia: Umut Özkırmı in conversation with Laura Favaro. *Teknokultura. Revista de Cultura Digital y Movimientos Sociales*, 22(2), 179-192. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/tekn.91032>

1. You're Cancelled!

The semantic trajectory of the term 'cancelled' is quite self-explanatory. First used as a line in the 1991 American crime thriller *New Jack City*, the term reached a wider audience with an episode of VH1's popular reality show *Love and hip-hop: New York*, aired in 2014 to 2.17 million viewers, in which cast member Cisco Rosado tells his love interest Diamond Strawberry «You're cancelled!» during a verbal altercation. The term then seeped into 'Black Twitter' (a term used to refer to active, primarily African-American Twitter users) and the broader public. Here, it morphed into a lexical weapon to galvanise opposition to perceived offense, in particular those committed by celebrities or other powerful figures, often accompanied with a call for boycotts. The final seal of approval came from the *Oxford English Dictionary* in March 2021, when it introduced a new, colloquial, definition of the term 'cancel': «In later use, esp. in the context of social media: to publicly boycott, ostracise, or withdraw support from (a person, institution, etc.) thought to be promoting culturally unacceptable ideas» —as well as an entry on 'cancel culture' to refer to the action or practice of 'cancelling'.

Though generally accurate, this definition is incomplete. Cancel culture, as practised today, goes beyond boycotting, ostracising, or withdrawing support. It covers a wide spectrum of sanctions from public 'naming and shaming' to job loss —which often entail the violation of basic rights such as due process and presumption of innocence— and on occasion involves outright attacks in the form of verbal and physical abuse, or indeed death threats. It is important to note here that surviving cancellation does not offset the mental and social toll of these campaigns. J.K. Rowling, perhaps the most well-known target of cancel culture in recent years, may continue to sell books, but this doesn't mean that she is unaffected by the death and rape threats she has been receiving since she publicly expressed her views on the transgender question (let's not forget here that she is herself a domestic abuse and sexual assault survivor. See Rowling, 2020).

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Laura Favaro, who spent years studying academia's toxic 'gender wars' as a postdoctoral researcher, and published a short summary of her findings in *Times Higher Education* (THE) on 15 September 2022 (Favaro, 2022). The article was nothing more than a teaser or a first look into the findings, but the little that was shared was ominous enough, even for someone like me who had survived a state-sponsored cancel campaign (for details, see Özkırımı, 2022a, 2022b and 2022c) and was writing a book on the degenerations of identity activism. I needed to know more about these findings, and perhaps cite them in my book, so I reached out to Laura three days after the THE article was published.

By the time I contacted her, Laura was already the victim of a vicious cancel campaign. The opening salvo came from Alison Phipps, a Professor of Sociology at Newcastle University, who outed herself as one of the participants in the research. She «now thoroughly regret[ted]» taking part in Laura's research, Phipps said in an angry and libellous Twitter thread, as it made her feel 'violated' and exposed. «I apologise to the trans community for participating in this research, which is going to cause damage», Phipps concluded

(see appendix). Once the floodgates were open, others swarmed in, true to the script of any run-of-the-mill cancel campaign. The objectives of the campaign were clear: the withdrawal of the article, the retraction of Laura's research findings and, at least according to one user, to end her career. «Hmmm, As we suspected...», wrote Sally Hines, Chair of Sociology and Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Sheffield, in reply to Phipps' thread. «We can still act!», she added. «Let's chat when I'm back from hol in 2 weeks xx». Phipps agreed (see appendix).

That was the most brazen and unscrupulous cancel attempt I had seen in academia so far, against a migrant early-career female colleague and self-described feminist no less.

2. Why do they hate us so much?

Laura was a bit apprehensive when I first spoke to her in late September 2022, but confident in her research, and even a cursory glance at the methodology section which she kindly agreed to share with me showed that her confidence wasn't misplaced. I told her that the university would surely stick by a project they themselves funded and, more importantly, for which they had granted ethics approval. I was wrong. «A lot is going on», she wrote when I tried to contact her again a few weeks later, «and I don't feel like talking about it right now».

And that was the last time I heard from Laura. Her Twitter account was deactivated; the emails started to bounce back; text messages remained unanswered. Hence I was relieved when she resurfaced several months later, only to find out that she lost her job, her data, her friends, and her mental health in the interim, struggling to make ends meet. She had no option but to take her former employer, City, University of London, to an Employment Tribunal for discrimination, harassment, victimisation, whistleblowing detriment and unfair dismissal (Favaro, 2023a). I encouraged her to make all this public. We needed to share her ordeal and ponder why her findings had to be suppressed at all costs. What was it that was so ghastly that even a colleague at City, University of London felt the need to rush to Twitter to condemn the university for granting ethics approval? «Wtf? Why do you hate me so much?», said Sahra Taylor (2022a) from City's Department of International Relations, claiming that Laura's research «clearly intended to cause harm» (Taylor, 2022b). Who did Laura hate? If she indeed intended to cause harm to people like Taylor, who identifies as a transgender woman, why didn't they simply let her publish her findings so that we could decide for ourselves? Could it be the other way around? Perhaps they were the ones who hated Laura, and anyone who disrupted the prevailing orthodoxy on gender?

So Laura and I started conversing, and asking questions. We discovered commonalities both in our academic research and in our personal experiences, as well as areas of difference and disagreement. In the end, we decided to take things to the next level, and embark on a journey to trace the mechanisms of cancel culture in academia.

3. Into the (battle)field

Umut Özkırımı: Let's start off with some context and background on the gender wars and your research

project. I also wonder, what prompted you to study this topic?

Laura Favaro: My curiosity was first piqued during fieldwork for my PhD on women's magazines back in 2014-2015, namely just after these consumer publications had begun a period of sustained attention to promoting a 'new' or 'rebranded' feminism (Favaro, 2017; see also Favaro and Gill, 2018). I interviewed close to seventy producers in the UK and Spain, and was intrigued by how some presented their coverage of transgender as evidence of their feminist or otherwise progressive credentials. Particularly striking was the case of Spain, where, for example, I was told that publications were reluctant to include content on lesbians, with writers and editors noting how (still) «to be a lesbian in this country is like a horrific thing» and citing fears over «negative reaction from readers and advertisers». In contrast, when it came to transgender, as an interviewee at *Glamour* remarked: «Throughout the year 2015 we have spoken time and time again about this topic». One illustration is an article titled 'The history of the corset that revealed Caitlyn Jenner as a woman', which featured the referenced *Vanity Fair* cover, and included the comment «it costs 200\$ (€) and can be bought online» alongside the web link to purchase it (Odriozola, 2015, my translation). The critical analysis here, not least in the well-established tradition of feminist media studies, seemed beyond obvious. Conspicuous too, I soon found out, was its absence: Where was the expected discussion among colleagues? What was happening, or what was I missing? I kept watching closely.

Only two years after widespread celebrations of 2015 as «the year trans finally went mainstream» (Welsh, 2015), a number of British commentators began to express concerns about a 'cultural backlash' and a 'moral panic' (e.g. Barker, 2017), soon followed by news about how the «Gender debate sparks bitter divide among trans and feminist groups» (*Sky News*, 2018). For some, the launch in 2018 of the UK government's public consultation into the Reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, including the possibility of legal sex self-declaration, prompted a much broader 'culture war' comparable only to Brexit (Strudwick, 2018). Since then, the debates and conflicts around sex and gender, in relation to both conceptual and practical issues, have surfaced not only in growing numbers of countries worldwide but also across areas of society including education, healthcare, social policy, legislation, as well as within the main political parties.

Yet manifestations of what is sometimes known as the gender wars appeared especially persistent and entrenched between transgender and women's rights groups, as well as within feminism itself. A case in point is the organisation of separate marches in Spain for International Women's Day in recent years. «Feminism will walk separately this 8-M for the first time in history», announced the newspaper *El País* in 2022, noting the divisive question of transgender in addition to those of prostitution and surrogacy (Valdés, 2022, my translation). This high level of polarisation is not limited to activist spaces though. Especially of note - and concern - is the situation in academia, where there has been a sea change in the calibre of discourse around sex and gender, and, moreover, codes of professional

conduct. Particularly with reference to universities in the UK, but also increasingly elsewhere (e.g. see Sanmartín, 2022 and Ellakuría, 2024, for the case of Spain), multiple incidents have reached national and international media outlets, including apropos the 'no-platforming' and 'blacklisting' of scholars, with claims about a «sacked or silenced» culture, as *The Guardian* (Fazackerley, 2020) put it. In turn, this has led to mounting appeals for «the higher education community [to] ensure that academic freedom is not curtailed» (Sullivan and Suissa, 2019, para. 1).

It is against this backdrop that the gap in empirical research on the gender wars became increasingly conspicuous, and which I set out to address via an ethnography of academia. Warnings that the field was far too risky to investigate, especially for a precarious junior scholar, have been constant from the very inception of my research; much like predictions that it would lead to the end of my career, alongside abuse online (or worse). At the same time as I received this advice by concerned colleagues, many previously enthusiastic supporters of my work vanished from sight, as did the usual invitations to collaborate, speak or apply for jobs. Something deeply problematic was clearly taking place, and I simply could not ignore the 'elephant in the room'.

My project began in March 2020 at City, University of London with an extensive document review, consisting of academic publications, together with other relevant materials such as those from advocacy, policy and journalism. Soon after I began an eighteen-month-long observation of public Twitter accounts supportive of different positions in relation to the gender wars. Fieldwork also included fifty semi-structured interviews, which were conducted between October 2020 and December 2021 with academics from all sides of the dispute who define themselves as feminists and work in the field of gender studies. Reflecting my interest in those with greater influence in academic institutions and cultures, thirty-five interviewees held posts at senior lecturer/associate professor level and above. Equally, included in the sample were acting editors and/or editorial board members at fourteen peer-reviewed journals on feminist, gender and/or sexuality studies. The qualitative findings then informed the design of a mixed survey questionnaire examining a range of issues pertaining to sex and gender, along with working conditions, self-censorship and censorship in academia. After three rounds of pretesting, and with funding from the British Academy, representative samples of social scientists at universities in England and Ireland were invited to complete the online survey in the summer of 2022, with over six hundred responses collected. My field notes and research diary offer additional data throughout the different stages of the project, including the events that followed the publication of my THE piece, where those initial predictions about what would happen if I pursued this research were proven rather accurate.

4. Police your own

Umut Özkırımı: That's where I come in too. I was working on the final draft of my book when your THE piece was published, and I remember thinking to myself, «how did *Times Higher Education*, a respectable yet mainstream outlet, publish this piece

without fear of serious repercussions. That's quite brave of them». I was, of course, following the gender wars myself, but I was not aware of your research and decided to reach out to you to find out more about your work. Sadly, the backlash was already underway when I contacted you three days after the publication of the article. And this brings me to cancel culture in academia, the topic of our conversation.

My own work (Özkırmılı, 2023a) suggests that there are three justificatory discourses on cancel culture within the identitarian Left, and this includes most of the transgender rights activists you mentioned earlier. The first, and most populous, group simply denies that cancel culture exists, treating it as a 'pseudo-crisis' or a moral panic instigated by the reactionary Right. For example, according to Sally Hines (2021): «The current free speech/censorship/cancel culture discourse is operationalised as part of a broader right-wing agenda that is desperately kicking back at social changes whereby marginalised groups are gaining a voice. It's a defensive power grab». The second group admits that it exists, but trivialises its impact, and claims, for example, that it doesn't have any real-life consequences, or even that it benefits its victims. When you call out the «the transphobia of mainstream culture», writes Sara Ahmed (2023) in the latest instalment of her 'Killjoy enterprise', the person on the receiving end of the accusation «will most likely represent themselves as 'cancelled', quickly embarking on a cancellation tour. And so, we end up with some people speaking endlessly about being silenced, given more platforms to claim they are no platformed» (pp. 27-28). Finally, there is a third group who openly defends cancel culture. For this group, cancel culture is about accountability and agency, a way of dismantling existing power hierarchies. That is what led Alison Phipps to publicly declare on Twitter that she is «withdrawing [her] peer review labour from publishers giving transphobia a veneer of intellectual legitimacy by publishing 'gender critical' books», including her previous (and my current) publisher Polity, which committed the 'cardinal sin' of publishing Karen Ingala Smith's *Defending Women's Spaces* (the now deleted tweet is cited in Lofft, 2022). I think both your research findings and your personal predicament show that these discourses don't make much sense for those who are targeted by cancel campaigns. Do you recognize these from your own experience?

Laura Favaro: Absolutely, and I would add that to an extent these have developed sequentially, in response to the accumulation of evidence discrediting the denialist position. Generally speaking, these are all discourses that have served their political purpose well, but thanks only to the accompanying no-debate tactic. Not only are they evidently contradictory, but ultimately, they don't stand up to scrutiny. Again, take the denialist discourse: we have substantial, undisputable evidence that there is a widespread culture of silencing and even persecution of those who question in any way what I call 'genderism', which is a relatively recent queer theory-inflected movement.

Umut Özkırmılı: Yes, before we go on, could you clarify terminologies for the readers?

Laura Favaro: Sure. So, seeing that all interview participants were identifying as feminists, while I was

collecting the data I used the terms 'gender-critical' and 'gender-affirmative' feminism as a sort of heuristic device to refer to the main orientations in the sex/gender dispute. After the analysis of hundreds of documents, thousands of tweets and hours of interview material, it became clear to me that the second is in fact radically distinct from feminism. To start with, the political subject is not women. Rather, it is a movement for all those (who feel) subjected to gender oppression, which, again departing from feminism (see below), is (re)defined as lack of external affirmation relating to 'gender identity', the core concept in genderism. In my data, this concept is understood as a purely internal sense of oneself as a woman, a man, both, neither or something else that can change even over the course of a day (Barker and Scheele, 2019). Yet gender identity is still prioritised over sex, which in genderism is understood as a social fiction (notably of colonialism), a malleable biological spectrum, paradoxically both, or simply dismissed as a transphobic dog-whistle.

Conversely, feminists use the term gender to refer to the set of roles, behaviours or attributes that a given culture determines as appropriate for people by virtue of their sex in order to enforce patriarchy: a political system that notwithstanding differences in time and place overall developed as «women's reproductive capacities became a resource that men had an interest in controlling and appropriating» (Jones, 2021a). In other words, the concept of sex is at the heart of the feminist explanation of the historical and global oppression of women, allowing for solidarity across difference, and indeed the very basis for the women's movement. Therefore, feminism recognizes that sex is a biological reality that matters in certain contexts, and strives to abolish the «*mechanism* of enforcement of sex-class relations» (Jones, 2021b; italics in original), namely: gender.

By contrast, genderism is sex-critical, as well as pro-gender. The book *How to understand your gender: A practical guide for exploring who you are* celebrates gender as a «vast and wonderful landscape» (Iantaffi and Barker, 2017, p. 60). It is unique to each person, «like a snowflake», further declare the queer-identifying influential authors Alex Iantaffi and Meg-John Barker (2017, p. 46). «Sometimes people think that gender liberation is about doing away with gender», they note, to then clarify: «This is definitely not our intention!» (Iantaffi and Barker, 2017, p. 85). Similarly rejecting the politics of gender abolition, Judith Butler (2014) asserts: «If gender is eradicated, so too is an important domain of pleasure for many people» (para. 22); and condemns how the «feminist police comes along to expose the construction» (para. 10). «Nothing is more important for transgender people», Butler (2014) also declares, than «to have their freedom and desire affirmed by the rest of the world» (para. 14). This evokes one of the most problematic aspects of genderism: it expects full submission or participation even from those external to its doctrine. What is worse, this is done largely via manipulation and coercion.

In terms of my research on academia, some interviewees had experienced threats of extreme violence and physical intimidation for voicing feminist views, while being ostracised by colleagues, subjected to malicious complaints at work or to vitriol online has become commonplace for very many of us. In

addition to expunging dissent, this serves the purpose of keeping all those watching 'in line'. «You see what happens to other people», my interviewees would remark when justifying their decision to «hide in the shadows». «We are all so afraid», I was told repeatedly. It may sound like material from a dystopian novel or a faraway authoritarian state, but it is happening right now at UK universities – and I had unique data to prove it¹...

Umut Özkırmı: «Police your own», «infiltrate» groups, «disrupt», «undermine», «be a thorn in the side», your former colleague Sahra Taylor once instructed followers (see appendix). Judging from my own experience, I know that women are particularly and disproportionately affected by these campaigns. In fact, this is how I was myself introduced to the gender wars. When I published the documents proving the fabricated nature of the allegations perpetrated against me, those who stood on the side of justice and due process were all women. And they were accused of being 'TERFs' (i.e. Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists, a pejorative term used for women who disagree with the gender affirmative stance) even though my case had nothing to do with transgender rights. In fact, most of them didn't even know what TERF stood for! Nor were they aware of the infamous website terfisasur.com/.

Laura Favaro: Absolutely, and feminists in particular; women with a track record of fighting against social injustice that are raising well-founded questions about threats to women's rights, and child safeguarding, as well as about the misogynistic, homophobic and (obviously) financial interests driving the gender industry, or stressing the importance of collecting sex data, of evidence-based discussion and protecting academic freedom. These are the concerns that someone as influential as Judith Butler (in Ferber, 2020) dismisses as «rich fantasy» (para.7) and reflective of 'anti-intellectual times'; those are the women that my genderist interviewees compared to white supremacists, fascists, Nazis, or in the best of cases «a fringe group of bigots, grifters and wannabes», as Professor Alison Phipps put it on Twitter in 2021 celebrating the exclusion of so-called TERFs from the London-based Feminist Library (the now deleted tweet is cited in Bindel, 2021).

These public expressions of hostility are the tip of the iceberg. As one sociologist who positioned herself as somewhere between the feminist and genderist positions told me, the latter's current hegemony in academia «produces actual material effects on people's careers», and, moreover, «gets enforced in extremely violent ways». It is for this reason that so many interviewees with views 'in the middle' were «terrified» of saying «something wrong» or that «sounded TERFy». These interviewees spoke of adopting «self-preservation» strategies that included abiding by the commands of the doctrine (e.g., adding pronouns to signatures), avoiding at all costs the topics (albeit with increasing difficulties), or even leaving gender studies altogether (in the face of personal and

professional detriment). «I just don't feel safe», said one scholar in feminist cultural studies with «fairly middle ground» views when explaining how she was considering no longer teaching her gender-related course. Breaking into tears, she went on: «it feels so alienating because [academia] should be about discussing and exchanging ideas, and it's not. It's not in our context. And it's not just alienating. It's also incredibly anxiety-provoking because I don't want to lose my job». As my own experience has shown, even conducting research that includes all perspectives by experts in the relevant areas is deemed unacceptable. Several genderist academics refused to take part in an interview or in the survey because I wasn't excluding those deemed to be involved in an «eugenicist approach to transness».

5. No qualms in silencing people

Umut Özkırmı: I actually find this flabbergasting. It was none other than Judith Butler (2022), a highly revered figure in gender studies circles, who told us in a recent essay on academic freedom how «no democratic public life is possible without the practices of careful reading [and] interpretive judgment» (p. 400). She was raising these concerns in the context of right-wing authoritarian regimes such as Hungary, Russia and Turkey. But censorship is a problem in Western academia too, and not always perpetrated by right-wing actors wielding state power, such as Ron DeSantis or Viktor Orbán. Radical identitarians also try to silence their opponents, using their position as cultural gatekeepers. Anyone who strays from the consensus is branded as fascist.

Laura Favaro: As regards my research topic in particular, to say that sex refers to binary and immutable biological categories, and gender to a set of cultural norms and stereotypes, gets you accused of complicity with the far right, capitalism and colonialism – moreover of hate speech, even of denying people who identify as transgender the very right to exist, indeed of advancing a genocidal project! This, in turn, is considered part of what Alison Phipps (2020) calls 'the white feminist war machine', which is taken to additionally include the initiatives against human trafficking and modern slavery. Here feminists are in the same way denounced for their so-called «border policing», «conspiratorial lobbies» and «white women's tears», for drawing upon «survivor stories» and for allegedly «invest[ing] trauma in the outrage economy» (Phipps, 2020, p. 146). According to Phipps (2020), «trans-exclusionary and anti-sex-work feminism amplify the mainstream movement's desire for power and authority», and demonstrate a «necropolitical desire for annihilation» (p. 135). She concludes: «This is ultimately an eliminationist project» (p. 157).

Umut Özkırmı: Note the element of psychological projection here. Wasn't it Phipps herself who said that she felt 'violated' after her interview with you and conspired publicly with Sally Hines to 'act', whatever that means? And not only Phipps. Joanna Drugan of Heriot Watt University and Amanda Rogers of Swansea University referred to your research as 'abuse' even though they weren't part of the study; according to Laura C. Carter of the Ada Lovelace Institute you were «aiming to

¹ Favaro retained her document and social media data sets, but days before her dismissal in March 2023 was withdrawn access to the interview transcriptions and survey responses. All interview quotes in this article were retrieved from the public realm (Favaro 2022, 2023b and 2023c). After this article had been written, in December 2023, Favaro regained access to the interviews. At the time of making the final edits to this article, she is still pursuing access to the survey data.

legitimise discrimination and hate» (see appendix), and Victoria Cann of the University of East Anglia claimed that your work was going to be harmful for 'trans liberation' as well as gender studies. Talking about 'women tears' and 'conspiratorial lobbies'... I cannot help but notice that all these names are also white. One wonders whether this is the 'white feminist war machine' Phipps alluded to.

Laura Favaro: The strategy of projection – like that of reversal – pervades genderist discourse, to be sure. But the point I wanted to make is that the current dispute around transgender is part of a broader conflict, and it is linked to other issues. More specifically, we are witnessing the culmination of a decades-long attempt to suffocate feminism, as part of a broader project of queering academia (Favaro, forthcoming). As is the case with 'trans women are women', to refuse to parrot the mantras of 'sex work is work' and 'labour is labour' will likely get you into trouble in our academic climate. In fact, complementing TERF is the slur SWERF (Sex-worker Exclusionary Radical Feminist) and, more recently coined by US-based queer theorist Sophie Lewis (2017), that of SERF (Surrogate-Exclusionary Radical Feminist). These terms are used to repudiate the feminist critiques of prostitution and surrogacy, which point to exploitation, trafficking, and other harms to women and children, as passionately voiced by activists worldwide (see e.g. posts in FiliA, n.d.). In contrast, academic discussions on these issues for the most part revolve around desire, choice and self-determination – the same individualistic, market-friendly and androcentric principles that inform the genderist approach to transgender.

Umut Özkırımı: This reminds me of Gucci's 2021 Aria campaign, 'Ontology of desire', which used canonical texts like Butler's *Bodies that matter* or Jean-Luc Nancy's *Sexistence*, as props to advertise its new wallet collection. The elevation of identity, even books, into objects of desire, the eroticisation of knowledge, all to sell wallets the cheapest of which cost £378 at the time (see Özkırımı, 2023b).

Laura Favaro: A central goal in transgender activism is what is framed as 'bodily autonomy for every body' (this is the very name of a 2020-2021 campaign by the influential organisation Gendered Intelligence, with acronym BÆB and «pronounced 'babe'») (Gendered Intelligence, 2020). Often the push is for such bodily autonomy to be without limits and regardless of consequences. It is not surprising that the most cited concern by my interviewees who were «afraid to open their mouths» was the gender affirmative model in relation to children, described as a «medical experiment», not least due to the high risk of irreversible harms (see e.g. Shrier, 2020; consider too the recent decision by the National Health Service in England to ban the prescription of what is often known as puberty blockers to «ensure that care is based on evidence, expert clinical opinion and is in the best interests of the child» as Health Minister Maria Caulfield put it in *SkyNews*, 2024). A related area of feminist concern that is suppressed in academia but increasingly discussed in activist and online contexts is the queering of childhood more generally (e.g. Cormier, 2022), alongside the legitimisation of paedophilia in queer theory (e.g. Dr Em, 2019a, 2019b and 2019c) (but also other spaces, including works in the field of sexology, e.g. Slatz, 2022). In

academia today it is not possible to raise these issues without being associated with 'think of the children' conservative rhetoric. Then there is the ever-present charge of 'political whiteness': «The defence of (cis) heterosexual white women and children is fundamental to contemporary global colonial racial formation» (Hunter, 2020, p. 5; see also Phipps, 2020), declares a publication by The Future of Legal Gender project, which received over £500K from the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) (Somerville, 2022). You might even encounter an accusation of bigotry against what an increasing number of academic texts are telling us (again) is a non-normative sexual orientation or stigmatised queer population, now renamed as MAPs: 'minor attracted persons' (see e.g. Walker and Panfil, 2017). As a final warning on where queering efforts could take us, and again thinking in particular about the safeguarding of children: another paper by The Future of Legal Gender project suggests there exists a «normative space for age-related self-determination» (Peel and Newman, 2020, pp. 20-21).

Umut Özkırımı: I am not sure I agree with all these, I have to say, especially your point about a linear link between paedophilia and queer theory. I am aware that there are people who are sympathetic to these views, and that they are trying to squeeze MAPs into the umbrella of so-called LGBTQ+ rights. I am just not convinced that we could blame this on queer theory as such which is not, at the end of the day, a homogenous and monolithic body of work. Let me ask you this though. Were these issues raised during your fieldwork?

Laura Favaro: Absolutely, this is about the stifling of feminism in academia, and how the current conflict around transgender is one piece of a bigger puzzle with a history. As the wall of no-debate continues to be knocked down, this will be more widely understood – including the decades-long 'wars' between feminism and queer theory. Beyond my extensive document review, I spoke to a number of individuals who had been involved in the 'sex wars' of the 1980s, including Sheila Jeffreys, who has written about how queer theory rose to prominence with the corporatisation – which also involved a re-masculinisation – of the university, along with the broader anti-feminist backlash of the 1990s (Jeffreys, 2000; see also Jackson, 1992, and Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996).

As to your objection, the argument is that paedophilia follows logically from the queer impetus to support «*whatever is at odds* with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant» (Halperin, 1995, p. 62; italics in original), in particular as regard sexuality, in addition to being a recurring theme from its very inception. Also of relevance to our discussion, and another underdiscussed reality, is how the founders of queer theory were open about their disagreement with feminism. Indeed it was developed precisely as «an autonomous theory and politics», as Gayle Rubin (1984, p. 170) put it in what is widely regarded as its founding document. For example, the feminist critique of «kiddie porn» (namely, child sexual abuse), prostitution and sadomasochism was decried as «a very conservative sexual morality» (Rubin, 1984, p. 166). Against this, *Thinking Sex* called for «a new sexual movement» for the «sexual liberalisation» and «erotic justice» of «sexual radicals» and stigmatised «sexual dissidents» or «exotically sexed individuals», including

paedophiles or «those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries» (Rubin, 1984, p. 151).

Another seminal text for queer theory, *Gender trouble*, rejected the feminist concept of patriarchy, and even «the notion of a generally shared conception of ‘women’», which in the early 1990s was proving «much more difficult to displace», Judith Butler (1990, p. 4) lamented. Fast forward twenty years, and Butler (2023) proclaims to have never known what a woman is, but does know that «the TERFs» are discriminatory and «an excuse for a narrow and hateful project». It is «a fringe movement» that must be prevented from speaking in the name of the mainstream, Butler has also stated (in Ferber, 2020, para. 5). Similarly, for Sally Hines (2019) the feminist perspective «runs counter to the ability to fulfil a liveable life or, often, a life at all» (p.155). Yet, it «has been extremely difficult to dispel», she further writes in the *Journal of Gender Studies* (Hines, 2019, p.146). This is despite all (her) concerted efforts: «I have no qualms in silencing people who need to hush the fuck up. In fact, I’ve put the slog in to be able to do just that», she once tweeted. «You and me both sis», responded Grace Lavery (see appendix), an UC Berkeley professor who has been described as «the most followed transgender scholar in the world on social media» (Felicity Bryan Associates, n.d.).

6. There cannot be a dialogue

Umut Özkırımı: This is also what I tried to highlight in my book, and not only with regard to questions of gender and sexuality. A simplistic, Manichean, mentality which sees the world through a black-and-white lens, you know, ‘us’ versus ‘them’, and a contempt for critical thought – to the point of anti-scientism, I’d say. And ironically, all of this is done in the name of marginalised groups or progressive activism. But what is progressive about ‘silencing people who need to hush to fuck up’? How is this different from reactionary attitudes these theorists are so eager to repudiate? Who are the real ‘bigots’ or ‘fascists’, those who ask questions or those who want to muffle critical voices, indeed eliminate them? After all, that’s what’s they’ve done to you, condemning you to social death.

Laura Favaro: In her influential 2015 blog, Sara Ahmed declared that TERF is not a slur but a position that aims to «eliminate people» (para. 25). The blog was a response to an open letter published in *The Guardian* denouncing «a worrying pattern of intimidation and silencing of [...] feminists critical of the sex industry and of some demands made by trans activists» (Campbell et al., 2015). Ahmed depicted this letter as not only giving «false impressions» (para. 5) but as a «mechanism of power» (para. 10), while paradoxically declaring that when it comes to TERFs: «There cannot be a dialogue» (para. 29). On the contrary, she was «aiming to eliminate the[ir] positions» (para. 25). With reference to those who challenge her with «evidence that trans activists are violent or incite violence against TERFs», she responded that «power is asymmetrical», and that any TERF can «unbecome» one (para. 25). To me, this reads like, if you want the (male) violence to stop, then (women) stop thinking the wrong thoughts.

Umut Özkırımı: That blog post by Sara Ahmed – the whole glib and highly marketised ‘feminist

killjoy’ project in fact – is a gem, in that it showcases all the problems inherent with identitarian thinking. It’s based on a static understanding of power relations, assuming that the roles of ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’, or ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’, are fixed and immutable. This may well be true at a systemic level, but it doesn’t explain individual cases. And power dynamics change even at the systemic level. Transgender people are still a disadvantaged group, especially if they are also non-white and working-class, but there is now an influential movement and powerful lobbies (including ‘big pharma’) that promote a pro-trans agenda. Even more importantly, this static view of power conceals the protagonists’ own privileged positions. Almost all outspoken defenders of the no-debate position are themselves prominent scholars, intellectuals or so-called influencers, not hapless victims of systemic oppression with no other platform than an anonymous Twitter account. Of all the names we have cited so far, only Sara Ahmed doesn’t have a position at a university, and that’s because she could afford to resign from Goldsmiths in protest of the university’s slack harassment policies. But she has a brand (‘feminist killjoy’) and a very influential blog; her books are published by prestigious presses and she has a Twitter account with over 83K followers. With one tweet, she can end careers. That to me is power, pure and simple.

Laura Favaro: I disagree with your statement ‘transgender people are still a disadvantaged group’, especially because of its various presuppositions. It seems to assume that there is a constant in time, agreed-upon, even objective, set category of people, when in fact what we are talking about is a shifting, multifaceted, thoroughly cultural and political, phenomenon. Moreover, membership of that alleged – radically heterogenous – group is determined exclusively by any one individual’s declaration about their internal ‘sense of self’. You would also need to specify what you mean by ‘discrimination’. There is no doubt that men who adopt an appearance culturally associated with women are vulnerable to potential punishment by other men. But do note that when genderists talk about discrimination, or even violence, this is principally with reference to dissenting ideas, and in particular those of feminists.

Umut Özkırımı: I wasn’t talking about the genderists’ understanding of violence of course, but structural discrimination. And that takes us back to ‘men’, as you also point out. The problem is, because of the obsession with symbolic violence or what is often referred to as ‘microaggressions’ – misgendering, pronouns – we never get to discuss the real problems which affect all historically disadvantaged groups, including women.

Laura Favaro: For genderists, there is equivalence between physical violence and symbolic violence. In this case, disagreement with gender identity theory is considered to cause harm or (symbolic) violence against people who identify as transgender, and this is considered as equivalent to – or even worse than – actual threats and acts of (physical) violence against feminists by transgender activists and their allies. Incitements to kill, decapitate, rape or punch TERFs in the name of ‘trans power’ have become all

too familiar online, but also increasingly offline. Yet my genderist interviewees would still equivocate, paradoxically even those working on violence against women. One sociologist explained during our interview that: «My priority are the people who are being harmed by this debate, who I perceive to be trans people». Thus follows the disturbing discourse of legitimate retaliation: «I can understand the backlash. Like, if I had been personally affronted, I can understand the want to retaliate», told me a PhD student in Criminology. This builds on ideas, as disseminated by Ahmed and other genderists, about unequal power dynamics and an existential threat. «We need to think and ask ourselves, who is holding more power [...] still cisgender women hold relatively more power than trans people», a sociologist told me. Another said: «These gender-critical feminists, they are intellectualising [sex and gender], and I think it's harmful». Yet she later admitted her complete ignorance about the nature of their arguments: «I stay out of their way». What I described in my THE article as a «remarkable coupling of condemnation and ignorance» was clear from the start of my project. An early entry in my research diary records a colleague saying to me: «I have never met a TERF, have you?». The entry also contains my observations about her lack of familiarity with the arguments, as well as (nonetheless) her very palpable repugnance toward anything associated with TERF. The (ideological) creation of this monstrous figure has played a key role in the objectification – and thus dehumanisation – of feminists, which we can expect to have in turn contributed to the levels of (often sexualised) violence and victim-blaming directed at them (for a discussion of the correlational links between these processes, see Bevens and Loughnan, 2019).

Umut Özkırımılı: As I said earlier, this is itself an act of power. The 'no-debate' position deprives critics of the dominant orthodoxy on gender of their status as legitimate conversational partners by equating them with fascists, even imputing genocidal intent to them. This is a stunning reversal of the presumed power hierarchy. It's Sara Ahmed (2015) who gets to decide what is worthy of debate and who is worthy of having a dialogue with, then tell us that «no citation can be a feminist policy» (para. 24).

Laura Favaro: One important finding from my research is that no-debate is also an internal policy in genderism. Engagement with any ideas external to their «echo chambers and bubbles» must be avoided at all costs, as must «honest conversations». Rather, the mandate is «be for your team and toe the party line», as a late-career academic in Education expounded. It is therefore not surprising that genderist interviewees struggled, or were discomfited, when asked to provide their own definitions of sex, gender and (particularly) gender identity. Remember, these are the experts in these very topics: journal editors, programme leaders, PhD supervisors... Some spoke about an «intuitive» sense of being «on the right side», while others trusted that (other) leading thinkers had considered the «complexities». My research suggests that this is not the case. The objection to feminism is political, a journal editor explicitly told me, and part of «a political battle over an institutional space», as an

interviewee who identified as a transgender woman put it. «Universities are not democratic spaces», asserted another genderist interviewee to justify the use of security and physical intimidation to remove Julia Long, a feminist activist and former academic, from the infamous 2019 event at City, University of London (see FSA and GSRC, 2019).

7. *Academentia*?

Umut Özkırımılı: This has already been a long 'conversation', so it's time to slowly wrap it up. I think the episode with Julia Long you just mentioned is a good place to end. This is something you referred to in your talks at the Open University Gender Critical Research Network (Favaro, 2023b) and Women's Declaration International (Favaro, 2023c), right? This, and the concept of '*academentia*'. Let me just note here for those who might think that you are not cancelled if you are given opportunities to express yourself. These talks are given on platforms founded by feminist 'mavericks': they only reach a niche audience of those (mostly women) already interested in the topic. That is, appearing on these platforms likely contributes to further ostracisation in the academic world.

Laura Favaro: «Survivor of *academentia*» was how Julia Long described herself in the interview consent form, inspired by the late Mary Daly (2000, p. 342, italics in original), who once said: «*of course* in patriarchal education the mind is stultified. What else would you expect?». Discussing the current «inoculation against feminism», another radical feminist, Sheila Jeffreys, reminded me that – after all – academia is «the engine room of the ideologies of male dominance». But there is more to how powerfully Long's phrase captures what I have documented and experienced in the field. It points to the exodus of feminists from gender studies, for reasons that include self-care and escaping «scholarship that is Thought Police», and more generally to the forced or voluntary departure of critical thinkers from academia. It evokes the state of scholarly paralysis by all those fearing repercussions, together with the inability to engage intellectually in genderism for political reasons, which materialise in policies like 'no-debate', or, relatedly, to avoid causing harm to others with their speech (and perhaps thoughts?). Also resulting from the strict application of poststructuralist ideas is a sort of conceptual nihilism. Consider the response to my question «how do you understand gender?» by nothing less than a journal editor: «But I don't. I'm a post-structuralist, so I don't understand gender. I don't understand any of the words I use per se».

The term *academentia* usefully connects the subjective with the systemic, reminding me of the one area of consensus across my interview participants: there is a toxic atmosphere in academia with serious detrimental effects across the board resulting from processes of neoliberalisation. The only recent writing on *academentia* I have found is precisely a critique of university governance today, where the term is used to describe how the takeover of managerial and neoliberal ideologies has led to «a state of organisational insanity» that negatively impacts the ability of academic workers

to function as scholars and educators (Klikauer and Young, 2021, para. 2). Again echoing my findings, management scholars Thomas Klikauer and Meg Young (2022, para. 12) additionally argue: «In today's academia, peers are forced to compete in a brutal fight to the death - at least the death of careers, sanity, mental, and even physical health». Much has been written about the fast-paced, market and metrics-oriented cultures of the contemporary university, where on top of generalised precarity, academic workers endure excessive workloads and ever-growing scrutiny, pressures and competition. These structural transformations have led to a decline in solidarity (Feldman and Sandoval, 2018), a rise in unethical behaviours (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020) and «a psychosocial and somatic catastrophe amongst academics» (Gill and Donaghue, 2016, p. 91). Added to this mix is the increasing penetration of elements from social media cultures: antagonism, the 'outrage economy', sound-bites and echo chambers, 'celebritisation'... Speaking of external influences, let's not forget the role played by lobby groups (like Stonewall, with reference to the UK) in the development of university policies that lead to the undermining of academic freedom and an atmosphere of intolerance towards differing views (Reindorf, 2021; Sullivan, 2022). Thus emerges an environment that fosters compliance, 'groupthink' and scholarly mediocrity or timidity, and where narcissism, bullying and despotism find fertile ground. Knowledge production, evidence, critique, innovation or debate give way to safe hot topics of the day and compelled speech with populist inclinations (as interviewees themselves told me).

Gender studies is a hotbed, but not the only area affected. Although I was never able to analyse the over six hundred survey responses by academics across the social sciences, I can recall other topics being mentioned in the section on censorship for reasons that included fear of job loss. Among these were politics in general, religion, race/ethnicity, disability and mental health, along with different aspects relating to children. Brexit, the COVID pandemic, China, Palestine and Israel were explicitly named a number of times. Survey respondents were also self-censoring on issues that could upset students or attract complaints, as well as refraining from voicing their criticism of working life in higher education and its management. I collected this data now getting close to two years ago...

Umut Özkırmırlı: ...And this data has been taken away from you. Honestly, I don't have enough expletives in my vocabulary to express my anger. Cancel culture thrives because of institutional complicity. I once thought nothing could surprise me anymore when I discovered that Lund University in Sweden (a public institution no less) let their employees conspire with the authoritarian Erdoğan regime to get me imprisoned in Turkey, and embezzled 200.000 Euros of taxpayers' money (Özkırmırlı, 2022c, see also Wark, 2023). What was particularly mind boggling was the concerted attempt to brush this under the carpet, even though everything was meticulously documented, and there was a criminal conviction. I wrote an open letter to the Vice Chancellor of Lund University and the European Commission; I contacted all major

Swedish newspapers and Academics' Rights Watch, an independent watchdog dedicated to exposing infringements of academic freedom in Sweden. Nothing. Not even an acknowledgement. Your case – indeed your research findings – show that the problem is much more pervasive and endemic than some might think. And it's not only the UK, or issues related to sex and gender, as you note. People continue to get cancelled for all sorts of reasons across the world. The task ahead of us is gargantuan. But we should not give up, for cancel culture has no place in academia.

8. Authors' contribution statement

Laura Favaro: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing (original draft; review and editing).

Umut Özkırmırlı: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing (original draft; review and editing).

9. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and constructive criticisms on an earlier version of this article. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to *Teknokultura* and its Director, Ángel Gordo López, for keeping the flame of academic freedom alive in these challenging times.

10. Statement on the use of LLM

This article has not used any text generated by a LLM (ChatGPT or other) for its writing.

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11. Appendix

 **Alison Phipps**  @alisonhipps ...

You may have seen the media article on a piece of research just out, focused on the splits in feminist academia over trans inclusion. I was one of the participants in this research (which I now thoroughly regret) and want to share a brief account of my experience of it.

9:28 AM · Sep 16, 2022 · Twitter Web App

 **Alison Phipps**  @alisonhipps · Sep 16 ...

I apologise to the trans community for participating in this research, which is going to cause damage, and for not raising my concerns at the time. I made a huge mistake and I am sorry. I will not be so trusting in future and share this partly to alert others to take good care.

 **Sally Hines** @sally_hines ...

Replying to @alisonhipps

@alisonhipps Hmmmm. As we suspected... 🙄

1:52 PM · Sep 16, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

5 Likes



 Tweet your reply Reply

 **Sally Hines** @sally_hines · 1h ...

Replying to @sally_hines and @alisonhipps

@alisonhipps we can still act! Let's chat when I'm back from hol in 2 weeks xx

1 1 1


 **Alison Phipps**  @alisonhipps · 1h ...

yes let's xx

 **Dr Sahra Taylor (she/her) It's still a p...** @SahraRa... · Jun 15, 2020 ...

Also:

- 1 Magnify the voices of trans people. Share their stories and perspectives. Buy their books, follow them etc.
- 2 Police your own. Cis women, take on cis women bigotry, cis men take on cis men bigotry etc.
- 3 Don't ask for trans people to educate you. Educate each other

 **Dr Sahra Taylor (she/her) It's still a p...** @SahraRa... · Jun 15, 2020 ...

- 4 infiltrate bio essentialist groups and get the low-down on what they are planning
- 5 disrupt, interrupt, undermine and generally be a thorn in the side of the trans exclusive brigade

Mallory Moore Retweeted



Laura Carter
@LauraC_rter

...

I also participated in this research in good faith: having read the press article, I regret doing so and I am truly sorry to the trans people who will be harmed as a result of *yet another* article aiming to legitimise discrimination and hate. twitter.com/alisonhipps/s...

← **Tweet**



Sally Hines
@sally_hines

...

I have no qualms in silencing people who need to hush the fuck up. In fact, I've put the slog in to be able to do just that.

11:52 pm · 21 Jun 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

6 Retweets 61 Likes



Grace Lavery: PLEASE MISS available for pre-order! @graceel... · 1h ...
Replying to @sally_hines
you and me both sis



2



4

