

Cite as: Phipps, A (2017) 'Speaking up for what's right: politics, markets and violence in higher education', forthcoming in *Feminist Theory*, DOI: 10.1177/1464700117722001

**Speaking up for what's right:
Politics, markets and violence in higher education**

Alison Phipps, Sussex University

There is a siege on universities on both sides of the Atlantic. The far right is targeting academics and their social justice work, bolstered by a mainstream suspicion of 'experts' and 'elites', and a general rightward political shift. There is a white supremacist, alleged serial sexual harasser and abuser in the White House, a hardline English government, and a 'new normal' that involves overt and unrepentant sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination. I have written about the feminist classroom as a 'safe space', and the need to protect our most vulnerable students. I have considered how the neoliberal university suppresses the capacities required to do this. I have theorised an 'institutional economy' of sexual violence, exploring how institutional (non-)responses are shaped by neoliberal rationalities. In this piece, I discuss how the market framings of sexual violence in the university interact with our contemporary political field and growing hostility to progressive work.

Universities are key neoliberal institutions. In neoliberal systems, the role of the state is to safeguard the market through deregulation and privatisation: the rhetoric is that the social good will be ensured by the unfettered operation of market forces. We are all expected to maximise our speculative value within multifarious systems of rating and ranking. Universities supply knowledge commodities for 'self-betterment', economic growth, and to support state relations with capital. Market logics are strongly evident in the metrics academics labour under, the emphasis on higher education as an investment with a return, the ideas of student as consumer and lecturer as commodity. These sit alongside a continuation of older forms of governance: Louise Morley (2012) describes the climate of contemporary HE through a binary of archaism and hyper-modernism. Universities, like neoliberalism itself, deliver the discourse of a meritocratic free market but continue to work in favour of the ruling class.

Sexual violence in UK universities made its way on to the agenda after the 2010 National Union of Students (NUS) report *Hidden Marks*, which found that 1 in 7 women students had experienced a serious physical or sexual assault, and 68 percent had been sexually harassed. NUS subsequently commissioned Isabel Young and I to research the 'lad culture' that frames student-on-student sexual violence (NUS, 2013), a topic which commanded national media attention. Activities such as initiation ceremonies, sexist themed parties and wet T-shirt contests came into focus in a 'moral panic' around alcohol, pornography, casual sex, and as the *Daily Mail* put it, the 'sickening rise of the male university students who treat women like meat.' More recently there has been discussion of staff-student sexual harassment, which has also seen dramatic media stories about 'epidemic' levels of this phenomenon. Opposing all this is a bogus politics around 'free speech', in which campaigns against lad culture

and sexual harassment are positioned as an infringement of men's rights. This chatter provides the backdrop to a wave of initiatives including policy development, consent education, disclosure training and bystander intervention, mostly student- and faculty-led.

This is also the political and cultural setting for university responses to sexual harassment and violence. I argue that these are preceded by 'reckonings' around potential risk and effects on future value, which brings us back to the higher education market, operating in a context of austerity and deepening cuts. For something to be marketable it must be unblemished: everything must be airbrushed out. Of course, communities often close ranks around sexual violence perpetrators. But the shift from university as community to university as commodity means that the impact of disclosure on institutional value must be projected and totted up. Markets in higher education operate via hierarchies of performance, and are also subject to the vagaries of public opinion. We do not want to lose our star Professor and his grant income. We do not want negative media coverage to damage our standing with potential students or key international donors. In some situations, we may reckon these priorities up against one another.

In the case of sexual harassment and violence, perpetrators are often protected because their welfare is intimately bound up with that of the institution. The power of being a 'four-star' academic (or footballer) can facilitate violence, and acts as a shield against disclosure. Compared to this, the survivor is dispensable. As one of my research participants said:

They will protect him because of his seniority or his perceived importance, they will protect him whatever he does. Now what I've described to you is kind of indefensible, and yet it was repeatedly defended over a period of years because of the REF.ⁱ

My twelve years of work on this topic has taken me into many different universities, but I have been struck by their similarities around how harassment and violence are 'reckoned up'. In most cases, concerns with institutional value take precedence over care for survivors. The previous quote is from an elite English university, where a member of staff cited 'a focus on finances and reputation to the detriment of wellbeing.' However, a student from a radical 60s institution similarly highlighted a 'culture of sweeping issues under the carpet...which may have more to do with appearance and a desire to recruit more students, than with student welfare.' The stakes are different – research profile versus student income – but the end result is the same.

The lack of care for survivors reflects how neoliberal cultures treat all of us: Stephen Ball (2012, p25), citing Margaret Radin (2001), defines fungibility as one of four characteristics of commodification in HE. In economics, when things are fungible they are all capable of substitution for one another, with no inherent value to the holder. Applying this concept to staff and students in higher education, however, reveals complexities to be unpicked. The example cited by Ball is the REF, and although he does not elaborate, it is certainly correct that this is an exercise in which scholarly work is given a numerical rating and aggregate numbers determine the rank of a department or institution, while the people in it disappear. The life of such

exercises *within* the university, though, is not about fungibility but differentiation. Systems of evaluation interact with traditional hierarchies (and often gender, race, class and other relations), to ensure that certain people are reckoned up differently. At least until the risks of protecting them outweigh the benefits, in institutional terms.

The impulse to protect perpetrators of sexual violence contrasts with situations where academics have been singled out for their political views and scholarship. In February 2017, the American Association of University Professors said administrations needed to be more proactive in defending academics, after a professor at Sacramento State received a barrage of attacks for criticising President Trump. The same month in England, a lecturer at Bristol was supported by Jewish colleagues after university management launched an investigation against her, following a student complaint about an article critical of Israel. These incidents reflect a broader context in which the far right has pinpointed universities as hotbeds of left-wing indoctrination. This narrative is increasingly being adopted by the mainstream press and accepted by some of liberal persuasion, under the rubrics of ‘tolerance’ and ‘freedom of speech’. In March 2017, the *Times* published an article entitled ‘Lurch to left raises concerns for campus free speech.’ In February, former Stanford Provost John Etchemendy had argued that the university was ‘not a megaphone to amplify this or that political view’.

Appeals to ‘freedom of speech’ on the part of the far right perform a rhetorical sleight of hand. They locate legitimate political speech on the right of the spectrum: conversely, left-wing and progressive speech is not speech but anti-speech, a threat to freedom of speech in itself. This convoluted rhetoric (and its growing influence) only makes sense in the context of broader shifts in what is found acceptable. As social justice gains recede, sexism, racism and other prejudices are increasingly seen as mere differences of opinion, while work to tackle them is situated as intolerant and oppressive. A recent report by the Adam Smith Institute on ‘left wing bias’ in UK academia (Carl, 2017) cited the (discredited) science in *The Bell Curve* around raced differences in intelligence, and Harvard President Lawrence Summers’ remarks about gendered differences in intelligence, as examples of ‘politically incorrect’ ideas which had been unfairly condemned. This discussion in the UK has reached its apex with the *Spiked* ‘Free Speech University Rankings’, in which anti sexual harassment policies (among other initiatives) can get an institution a ‘red’ rating. The 2017 rankings were reported largely uncritically in English liberal media outlets, as well as conservative ones.

The contortions involved in using ‘freedom of speech’ to protect bigotry and harassment echo earlier appeals to ‘banter’ as a shield against criticism of laddish sexism (NUS, 2013). Similar rhetorical strategies can also be found amongst more progressive communities: Sara Ahmed (2012, p217) uses the terms ‘critical sexism’ and ‘critical racism’ to refer to academics who identify as left-wing or radical, who have articulated noncompliance with equality and harassment policies as a rebellion against neoliberal audit culture and Victorian ‘moral panics.’ However, contemporary far right rhetoric around ‘freedom of speech’ is part of a broader culture war in which universities are targeted as sites of resistance. Ironically, this operates alongside the genuine threat of censorship which resides in the government’s Prevent programme: this includes in its list of ‘potentially extremist’ views criticism of wars in the Middle East, and criticism of Prevent. The resounding silence of ‘free speech’ campaigners

around Prevent is confirmation, should this be needed, that their politics is not about freedom of speech at all.

If these debates are not worrying those who work on sexual violence in higher education, they should be. The protection of sexual predators and the lack of it for political academics both reflect a preoccupation with public opinion in the context of what it is possible (and impossible) to airbrush out, rather than considerations of principle. This highlights the apolitical nature of the neoliberal university, in which equality is subordinate to market concerns. Indeed, it is often performed for market benefit, for instance in schemes such as Athena SWAN, where institutional airbrushing can require that bad practice is covered up. When politics recedes, resistance is repackaged as ‘complaint’. Sara Ahmed (2017) highlights how those who bring problems to institutional attention *become the problem*: feminists, anti-racists and others are cast as ‘complainers’, and dismissed. However, in far right campaigns against these (and other) political academics, another form of complaint is deployed: consumer complaint. A 2016 US *National Review* article entitled ‘Yes, universities discriminate against conservatives’ argued that ‘parents are paying tens of thousands of dollars to send their children to glorified propaganda mills’. Calls for US academia to reflect the ideological balance of the population, now spreading to England and overseas, use the language of democracy but may ultimately convey that the customer is always right.

In response to activism, most UK universities are taking a stand – rhetorically at least – against sexual violence. However, we should consider whether a showdown with the far right around the spectre of ‘left wing intolerance’ is somewhere in our future. Media coverage of consent workshops has already situated them as a threat to free speech. Is it possible that students might eventually demand protection while they parrot rape myths or talk about grabbing their classmates by the pussy? As in the US, could we see threats to withdraw government funding if we refuse to platform those whose hate speech has been redefined as merely ‘provocative’? If the ideological targeting of universities continues to influence the mainstream, this will shape institutional reckonings. We must challenge university administrations to recognise, and speak out against, these manoeuvrings for what they are. We must ask our institutions to reaffirm principles of equality and progressive social change. To support survivors – and other vulnerable people – we must all figure out where our lines are drawn, and resolve to hold them.

References

- Ahmed, Sara (2012) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Ahmed, Sara (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Ball, Stephen (2012) ‘Performativity, Commodification and Commitment: An I-Spy Guide to the Neoliberal University.’ *British Journal of Educational Studies* 60(1): 17-28
- Carl, Adam (2017) *Lackademia: Why Do Academics Lean Left?* London: Adam Smith Institute. Available at: <https://www.adamsmith.org/research/lackademia-why-do-academics-lean-left>

Morley, Louise (2012) 'Researching absences and silences in higher education: data for democratisation.' *Higher Education Research & Development* 31(3): 353-368

National Union of Students (2013) *That's What She Said: Women students' experiences of 'lad culture' in higher education*. London: NUS

Radin, Margaret (2001) *Contested Commodities: the Trouble with Trade in Sex, Body Parts, and Other Things*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

This piece was originally developed as a public lecture for 'Tackling Gender-Based Violence in Universities', a one-day conference held at Newcastle University on March 14th 2017.

ⁱ 'REF' refers to the Research Excellence Framework, which is an evaluation of the research of UK higher education institutions carried out approximately every seven years.