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Academia must not dissolve scholarship into politics

Scholarly rigour must be put above ideological virtue signalling

Artillery Row

By

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22 August, 2024

A series of incidents on social media have highlighted the extent of politicisation of academia, in ways of which a wider public may not have been aware, and constitute a legitimate concern at a time when the very nature of the UK HE sector faces difficult questions.

This began with the publication of [an article by mathematician John Armstrong](#) on the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education and their recommendations relating to [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion \(EDI\)](#), Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education (EEE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The QAA themselves [withdrew from being the designated quality body for UK higher education](#), effective from the end of March 2023, with [the statutory responsibilities having been taken over by the Office for Students](#). Nonetheless, the QAA still have an advisory role and [issued a new code earlier this year](#), their [first since 2018](#).

Armstrong's article, [of which a summary of the main arguments has been published in *The Critic*](#), emphasises the explicit role in the QAA's recommendations of "[critical pedagogy](#)", a form of pedagogy rooted in the work of Paolo Freire's 1968 book [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#), and popularised by [Henry A. Giroux](#). Freire wrote that "[The educator has the duty of not being neutral](#)" and that "[Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral](#)", a form of rhetoric not so far away from George W. Bush's notorious post-9/11 statement "[Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists](#)". The report advocates education "promoting a questioning of dominant power structures and assumptions within society". Mathematicians and scientists are instructed to prioritise examples of predecessors whose work loaned support to eugenics, slavery, racism or other forms of discrimination. The QAA also draw upon a [highly contentious report by Rosalyn McKeown for UNESCO](#) about ESD, indicating that the "promotion of sustainable development" is the only priority, and other educational elements can and should be omitted. Such sentiments will be familiar to many working in higher education, even if they might seem strange or extreme to others.

Armstrong links the report to the imperatives of "decolonisation of the curriculum" and postmodernism, controversies relating to EDI (for example [relating to Athena Swan](#)) which are mostly not considered by the QAA, and the marginalisation of scientific merit. Problems he identifies include diminished opportunities for teaching

core skills of numeracy, clear writing, computer literacy and logical thinking, as well as forcing educators to teach politics rather than their areas of expertise, much potential for bias and presentation of highly contested ideas as if they were factual, undermining of scientific rigour, major limitations on the freedom of academics to choose what they teach and students to choose what they learn, and discrimination against various types of students.

This programme, which Armstrong notes was attempted in a failed module at King's College London, amounts to nothing less than a total politicisation of education. Freire's work, explicitly grounded in highly contested Marxist thought, becomes not simply a perspective for critical consideration, but the basis of subject benchmarks. It renders impossible the idea that a teacher can do anything other than advocate a political position, and also generally insist that only one type of position is acceptable. This is reminiscent of [education in the Soviet Union](#), in which courses in "Marxism-Leninism" were compulsory, doctoral dissertations were combed for ideological correctness, and dissent was not tolerated. Even in that Soviet context, however, some more conventional measures of ability and talent played their part, though [an education totally consumed by indoctrination was more complete in communist Albania](#). It is shocking to think that this sort of approach is even being advocated in free countries.

One academic who responded very positively to Armstrong's tweets about the paper is the opera and cultural politics scholar Alexandra Wilson, who has [written frequently for this publication](#) on a range of subjects (not all musical). Wilson, alas, was recently [made redundant from a professorship at Oxford Brookes University](#), one of the first such staff to go in light of the ultimate closure of the Music Department at that institution, despite having published five books (with more to follow soon) and brought in major research grants. Quoting one of Armstrong's tweets, Wilson [wrote specifically](#):

I have long been uneasy about a growing compulsion for academics to bring political agendas into teaching and research. (I believe political views are private and that the lecturer has no right to use their platform for propaganda.) Turns out I wasn't just imagining this.

The scale and tone of the overwhelmingly negative replies and quote tweets received by Wilson, constituting a pile-on and a form of [academic mobbing](#), were shocking. Many responses were from other academics, the vast majority from the humanities and social sciences, and a few from the arts, in most cases linked to varieties of "[grievance studies](#)" and identity politics. Plenty consisted simply of personalised abuse and insults, while some of these and others made predictable claims of privilege, racism, white supremacy, Eurocentrism, etc. on the part of Wilson.

Most took the view that "everything is political", that to dispute or disavow this is itself a political act (a classic "[Kafka trap](#)"), and that to take anything other than a particular political position is an act of complicity with the status quo. More than a few demanded that academics be open about their politics, denying they ever can or should be private. Others refused to differentiate teaching about cultural politics and preaching politics.

Above all, the responses were from those who are activists first, academics second, but believing the two things are synonymous. There were a handful of dissenting voices, not least that of [Jo Phoenix](#), who [asked one poster](#) insisting that not bringing a political agenda to research was a “morally negligent” act, “what makes academic knowledge different to political propaganda?” In these activists’ world there is no such difference, and alas this may form the basis of plenty of teaching. Some others such as computer scientist [Michael Bronstein](#) maintained that [their own teaching and scholarship was separate from political opinions, which would undermine it](#), but faced similar reactions to Wilson.

If almost any of these activists were teaching in UK primary or secondary schools, they would be breaking the law and as such subject to potential disciplinary action. There have long been laws forbidding teachers from the promotion of partisan political views in their teaching, made very clear in the [1996 Education Act](#), and for which [new guidance was issued in 2022](#). Whilst I believe that making such a stipulation at tertiary level would be inappropriate when educating adults, and a constraint on academic freedom, nonetheless a looser adherence to the principle is valid.

[I have argued before for this publication](#) that hijacking academia for the purposes of activism, not least at the hands of many laying claim to the mantle of “decolonialisation”, is an abuse of their position, in line with the views put forward in [a classic essay by sociologist Max Weber](#). The issue has also been considered in a series of excellent articles by Katy Barnett [here](#) (with a longer version) [here](#) and [here](#). At a time when the very future of higher education is under question, at least in the UK, as many institutions face losses and subsequent cuts, closures and redundancies, the extent to which at least some parts of academia have been taken over by entryist activists deserves serious consideration/

Wilson, like some other sceptics of various recent directions in higher education including [Eva Moreda Rodriguez and myself](#), has researched the fate of music under fascist regimes, with outcomes as unhappy as under communist ones. I find it hard to believe that many who are aware of these histories, or for that matter the hideous total politicisation of art in the Soviet Union resulting in the [decrees](#) of [Andrei Zhdanov](#), would not see the implications of what is now being urged by organisations like the QAA and in many cases also followed in practice.

A university is a place for the development and dissemination of knowledge, for free inquiry and the questioning of orthodoxies, including political orthodoxies. Its strength, and the faith placed in such an institution, relate to a wider public belief that such knowledge is generated according to the best rigorous scholarly principles. If knowledge is valued solely or primarily according to the politics embodied therein, then a lot of the research necessary to arrive at such knowledge becomes essentially redundant — all the scholar really has to worry about is arriving at the right political conclusion. But the data, the reasoning or other factors may point in various directions, which no scholar can know for sure until they have done the research. If there is no *scholarly* reason for favouring one type of knowledge over another, then there is no reason for a university at all. Furthermore, when knowledge is judged according to its politics, its value will be meaningless to one who does not share the politics of the one doing the judging. In short, the serious business of knowledge

production becomes little more than a virtue-signalling game between politically like-minded figures.

The statement, or rather mantra, that “everything is political” is banal in the extreme. At its worst it leads to juvenile assertions that if one is, say, relaxing for a period, then one is not out trying to smash the system and is thus a reactionary individual complicit with the status quo (some of the responses to Wilson were not far away from this). But one could equally claim everything to be philosophical, everything religious, everything aesthetic, or whatever. Why should politics have priority over other paradigms, especially for academics who are not primarily politics scholars? There are probably not so many things for which one could not locate some political dimension if really determined to. But if I choose to wait before crossing the road because a car is going past at a reasonable speed, I believe this is a pragmatic decision to avoid an accident rather than particularly a political one. When someone expresses sympathy to another who has undergone a bereavement, this is an act of kindness and humanity, rather than a political act. Discerning how a Mozart concerto relates to the conventions of his time, including those followed by many now-forgotten composers, may be an observation which could be employed in the service of some political argument, but the discernment is not in itself innately political.

The phrase “the personal is political” became well-known after [Carol Hanisch’s 1969 essay of that name](#) (though the title was not Hanisch’s). Hanisch’s arguments that areas of life not traditionally conceived as being in the realms of politics often feature power relationships which are themselves political remains worthwhile, but it is time to question this ubiquitous slogan. Somewhat in the manner of [Michel Foucault](#), Hanisch appears to wish to dissolve issues commonly conceived as relating to therapy as belonging to a category of “political therapy”, thus redefining all such problems as collective rather than individual. But this is very crude and marginalises those problems which are highly individual. Neither Hanisch nor anyone else has a right to judge others for dealing with these in their own way.

The reduction of all to the “political” leaves little place for a private life, private thoughts, desires, fears, and beyond which individuals are not obliged to share. And crucially, no place for the sort of privacy about one’s political views which are the essence of [secret ballots](#), designed to protect voters from external intimidation and other pressures. Those demanding all educators must declare their politics are quite deliberately seeking to expose them to other forms of intimidation and censure, a form of political bullying more appropriate in a totalitarian regime. Karl Marx declared [in his Theses on Feuerbach](#) that philosophy was not the point compared to changing the world, while a later Marxist, Max Horkheimer (though one [whose politics changed significantly in the post-1945 era](#)) [put forward a similar view](#) as a prescription for theorising, from which the term [critical theory](#) originates. This is wholly different to [critical thinking](#), but is often what academics mean when they use the term “critical”. This is not about a process of rational cognition on the basis of disciplined evaluation of data, sources, perspectives, arguments, but an imperative that only thinking geared towards large-scale social change has any worth.

This is intolerable in a modern free university, for many of the reasons Armstrong discusses in the context of the QAA and UNESCO guidelines, not least because it is fundamentally discriminatory towards students who should be allowed to determine

their own politics, not be forced to adhere to an approved ideology. Barnett mentions a lecturer who told a class that he preferred students whose political views coincided with his own, and I have encountered many others who think their mission is to bring students round to their mode of political thinking. Students deserve better than this, and ought to register complaints whenever they encounter this mode of teaching.

[I have written elsewhere](#) about how to create a genuinely *inclusive* classroom in which students of all political persuasions can feel at home, in response to a [thought-provoking tweet on the issue](#). Suggestions include representing a plural range of political and other perspectives in lecture materials and set readings, making clear that a lecturer's own views (if they choose to make them explicit) should not be assigned any particular priority, nor will students win favour by concurring with them, ensuring alternative views are injected into classroom discussions, avoiding leading questions, charged rhetoric and politically passive-aggressive language, not presenting highly contested thinkers (nor particular views of the marketplace and commerce) as if objectively true, and more. Panels for job interviews should regularly ask candidates for academic positions how they would treat respectfully students with political views different to their own (which might include some from various global religious backgrounds). And students should never, ever be asked to participate in the demeaning process of "[privilege walks](#)", which holds some students up for shame because of their background, which [I have elsewhere discussed in the context of music education](#), with examples of students being made to step forward to check their privilege because of having learned music theory or being able to read notated music.

An inspiring case of an inclusive educator was the late [Ralph Miliband](#), father of David and Ed, but far to the left of both, a dedicated Marxist who had little time for the Labour Party. In the 1950s, he taught [John Moore](#), who would go on to become a right-wing member of Margaret Thatcher's cabinet. But after Miliband was [attacked in the Daily Mail](#), Moore [leapt](#) to his defence, calling him "one of the most inspiring and objective teachers" he had had, and noting how despite different political views "he never treated me with anything less than complete courtesy and I had profound respect for his integrity". Contemporary academics could learn plenty from Miliband in this respect.

It is too easy to conflate teaching about political subjects, or subjects for which political dimensions can be found, and preaching politics in one's teaching. [Alan Sokal has written](#) regularly about the distortion of science in the service of political causes, always noting such things as the difference between the validity of scientific inquiry itself and such political questions as the uses to which it might be put, which types of science do or do not receive funding, and so on. Even when teaching about such an obviously 'political' event as an election, it is possible to consider the framing of the debates, the nature of campaigning, the role played by opinion polls, comparisons with other elections, in ways which do not require having to "declare" for one side or another. Indeed such teaching is probably better without the latter.

But others want to insist on politicising all teaching. According to the UNESCO report, ESD should permeate the curriculum, and it is suggested that music students be asked to compose song lyrics about water conservation. What is specifically musical about this is anyone's guess, but it is in line with the range of music composed today which is musically banal, but [linked to issues such as climate change](#).

Debates about [either the value or even the political efficacy of such an approach to music](#), such as were [dissected most acutely by Theodor Adorno](#), are lost in this process.

The heavy politicisation of academia is also consolidated through politically charged appointments, some of which make relatively muted mention of the discipline in question, in comparison to the required politics. Recently, the Department of Music at the University of Southampton has advertised for a “Lecturer in Music Production and Social Justice” to join the [Southampton Centre for Music Education and Social Justice](#), requiring “foregrounding social justice” and suggesting that the candidate “pursue research around the structural, racial, gendered and socio-economic legacies that impact music today”. Another position was for a “Lecturer in Sustainable Music Business”, for which suggested areas include “critical infrastructure studies”, and “music and social inequalities (including gendered, classed, racialised, ableist and other oppressions”, and which should focus on a departmental research strategy “including sustainability, social justice and AI”.

Lancaster University has a “[Lecturer in Decolonisation](#)”, Sussex a “[Professor of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies](#)”, while the University of the Arts London advertised earlier this year for a “[Professor in Anticolonial, Postcolonial and Decolonial Histories and Praxes](#)”. There are also any number of positions with “social justice” in the title (see for example [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). It is possible that some of these latter are open to various of those exploring this extremely broad concept, which [originated in nineteenth-century conservative Jesuit thought](#), or who might engage with [explorations of the concept by the likes of John Rawls](#), rather than favouring those adhering to particular political positions, but this process warrants proper investigation. If there was a plethora of jobs with titles like Professor of English and Immigration Control, Senior Lecturer in Free Enterprise, Lecturer in Economics and Welfare Fraud, Reader in Deregulating Markets or Associate Professor of Deunionisation and Postunionisation, there is little doubt that some others would heartily protest at this sort of politicisation. Yet such areas represent policy views held by many MPs and voters and are not beyond the pale of civil society in which students live and graduates hope to work, however disagreeable some might find them.

What appear to be activist jobs need to be tested properly against [protection of belief as stipulated in the Equality Act 2010](#) (which [some lawyers have argued does protect political beliefs](#), as do other laws relating to unfair dismissal). Meanwhile, brilliant and accomplished scholars such as Wilson may struggle to find new long-term positions, as historical musicology is marginalised in many departments in favour of more activist-oriented work. The journalist Charlotte Gill has [documented a huge number of highly politicised publicly funded academic research projects](#), invariably of the “identity synthesis” variety, a [term from Yascha Mounk](#) I use in preference to “woke”. Academics are regularly expected to bring in research money, and their chances of doing so appear to be enhanced if they undertake projects of this nature.

When universities and university departments become ideology factories, brooking no dissent, they do not deserve government support, funding or access to student loans. As the writer Helen Pluckrose has written in her new book, [The Counterweight Handbook](#), any attempts to match attempts by academics adhering to what she

categorises as Critical Social Justice, who try to bully out other academics who do not share their beliefs, by trying to drive some of these out, is neither realistic or ethical. But there are real questions to ask about how this situation has been allowed to proceed in academia, the ways it facilitates and encourages bullying and mobbing behaviour towards academics like Wilson and many others, and the possibility of new stipulations which could be a requirement for university registration.

This phenomenon may relate to the earlier attempts to increase teaching in the humanities, to serve students with little interest or aptitude in the types of highly demanding work these have traditionally involved. If it was guaranteed that everyone with a History degree would have experience of archival research, of critical navigation of large bodies of secondary literature, deciphering documents in multiple languages, some archaic, and understanding the methodological challenges of oral history; if all those with Music degrees had developed skills in counterpoint, keyboard harmony and improvisation, advanced analytical techniques, approaches to historical method, and knowledge of plural global musical traditions; if every English graduate had read a large range of poetry and prose from different eras and regions, could easily identify poetic forms, had some knowledge of the development of the language and perspectives on the history of such literary traditions and their reception; then these degrees would really be valued and would likely be quite competitive for entry. Politicians and others need to consider the possibility of a reorientation of the arts and humanities in particular

[The percentage of students studying Humanities subjects fell from 28 to 8 per cent between 1961-62 and 2019-20.](#) A move back to an insistence on rigorous teaching would reflect the fact that these subjects appeal and seem appropriate for such a minority. Some existing courses are sustained by much “softer” approaches to study, I believe, with such things as “reflective portfolios”, a culture believed by some students and academics to emphasise feeling good about oneself, emoting, and declaring political opinions without any need to subject these to scholarly critique, with much less requirement to undertake sustained reading of primary texts. Such approaches are argued by some to be more “inclusive”, but constitute a devaluing of the disciplines, and are ideal environments for teaching in a manner which emphasises activism (but obviously with no mandatory requirements that students actually affect social change) rather than scholarship. Didactic political messages are much easier to take in and reiterate.

There is much debate at present about the value of some degrees, and whether some more focused technical education would be more appropriate, rewarding and provide better job prospects for students than forms of “humanities-lite”, which frequently morph into “politics-lite”. Whether [the move on the part of polytechnics to include non-technical subjects, or the reconfiguration of short-lived Colleges of Advanced Technology to become more regular universities](#) were wholly positive changes remains open to debate. Politicians and others need to consider the possibility of a reorientation of the arts and humanities in particular, which might require some narrowing of provision. But it is paramount to aim for a situation in which all disciplines prioritise scholarly rigour, and scholarship is not dissolved into politics, even if this makes studying for a degree a more challenging experience.