GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

# Studies in Subversion: The Battle Over Higher Education in Europe

**Article by Andrea Pető, Éric Fassin**
June 14, 2022

Across Europe, higher education faces attacks from multiple sides. In Hungary, the authoritarian government has taken steps to curtail academic freedoms and restrict the space for scientific study and political debate. In western Europe, politicians and media figures have singled out certain disciplines as places of ideological inculcation where freedom of speech is suppressed, and the social fabric is threatened. University professors Éric Fassin and Andrea Pető explore how these developments fit into broader trends reaching beyond national borders, and why these attacks undermine the independence and pluralism of academic enquiry.

**Green European Journal: In Hungary we have seen a sustained attack by the Fidesz government on academic freedoms and a targeting of certain disciplines such as gender studies. Why is gender studies perceived as such a threat?**

**Andrea Pető**: Gender studies scholars have long warned that an attack on their subject is just the beginning of a broader attack on democracy. Gender studies is the canary in the coal mine for the state of liberal democracy in a country. Both the removal of gender studies from the list of accredited studies in Hungary and “Lex CEU” were part of the conservative legal counter-revolution during which the Fidesz government used the available legal framework to attack liberalism, democracy, and democratic institutions.[1] The anti-gender movement is not merely another offshoot of centuries- old anti-feminism; it is also a nationalist neoconservative response to the crisis of the global neoliberal world order.

The problem is that politicians still do not consider higher education and academia a strategic element of national security. The fact that higher education is a national prerogative rather than an EU competence also made both the Central European University (CEU) and gender studies vulnerable. Like pandemics, higher education and academic research are inherently transnational. What happens in Hungary’s illiberal academia should be a concern for the whole academic community. Hungarian students and researchers participate in exchange programmes across Europe and the world. If there is no effective quality control of academic work, and if demonstrating loyalty to the rich and powerful is the only way to get ahead, this infects the higher education systems of other countries as well. The basis of science and teaching is trust in standards; if results are fraudulent and untrustworthy, this can be profoundly damaging.

**Éric Fassin**: This is not specific to one country. Campaigns against gender started with the Vatican; they exploded in France in the early 2010s, and they have since spread to many countries, in particular in Europe and Latin America. Even Putin has now joined the crusade.

Why gender? This has to do with what I call sexual democracy. I developed this concept prior to the anti-gender campaigns to make sense of the politicisation of gender and sexuality through public controversies; about same-sex marriage, in particular. Why should some feel that this is the end of the world? I argue that it has to do with sexual democratisation. We live in societies that claim to be democratic, in the sense that the social order is supposed to be defined not by some transcendent principle (God, Tradition, or Nature), but by "us". Of course, this raises the question: who are "we"? Who can participate in defining the world we all live in? The democratic logic means that those who are left out can protest, and perhaps eventually redefine who "we" are. Same-sex marriage is a case in point. Sexual democracy means that even the sexual order is defined by "us"; so it is open to change and subject to contestation. This triggers an anthropological panic among conservatives. Sure, they usually pretend to favour a democratic model of society, but they insist on limits. Sex is their imagined refuge, safe from history and politics. For them, the sexual order exists outside history and politics; it is a natural order, as if the body were not a social as well as a biological reality. This is why they have a problem with gender: it denaturalises sex.

**In France, there has been a chorus of alarmism – among right-wing commentators but also government ministers – about the end of freedom of speech and the idea that universities have become places of infiltration and indoctrination. The disciplines of critical race theory and post-colonial studies have been singled out as threats to the social fabric. How do you view these allegations?**

**EF**: President Emmanuel Macron initiated this polemic in June 2020 as a way of launching the campaign for his 2022 re-election. In *Le Monde*, he accused academics of seeking to divide the Republic by "encouraging the racialisation of society". This was a prelude to attacks by Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer, who, after secondary school teacher Samuel Paty was murdered [for showing students cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad], denounced an "intellectual complicity with terrorism". Academic "Islamo-leftists" soon became the target of an investigation announced by Frédérique Vidal, then minister of higher education. The timing of the president's attack coincided with the end of the first lockdown. Discrediting "intersectionality" was paradoxical when it became clear that articulating race, gender, and class was essential to understanding the pandemic, both epidemiologically and in terms of "care". Moreover, this was also the moment when social movements could reclaim the streets and precisely when the echoes of Black Lives Matter resounded in France most loudly, with demonstrations against police violence and racial profiling.

The refusal to acknowledge systemic racism, as well as Islamophobia, can help us to understand the attack against academia; as if such notions were purely ideological, as if they had no empirical reality. This comes at a time when these concepts have become part of the repertoire available for younger generations. Academics are thus accused of corrupting the country's youth. What it shows, in fact, is that those in power acknowledge the intellectual circulation between academia and social movements, hence the attacks against the politicisation of the social sciences.

*Illiberal forces are hijacking higher education for*

*their own gain and emptying it of any values.*
*Andrea Pető*

**Some conservatives have taken aim at post-modernist thinkers such as Michel Foucault for supposedly undermining respect for facts and objectivity, thereby encouraging the rise of "post-truth" and a decline in public trust. Why the focus on these schools of thought as a destabilising force?**

**EF:** In France, a conference against "deconstruction" (defining philosopher Jacques Derrida as the ancestor of "woke culture") was organised at the Sorbonne in January 2022. This was introduced and supported by the minister of education.

There are two accusations levelled at academia. On the one hand, relativism. On the other, dogmatism: anything goes and cancel culture, queering identities, and identity politics. This contradiction is significant. Critical thought does question the absolute authority of truth. But historicising truth does not mean the end of truth, only of what could be called a theological regime of truth. Raising the question of who is excluded from current definitions of the world does complicate our understanding of truth, but it makes it more truthful, not less.

This is why "post-truth" has nothing to do with Derrida or Foucault. Indeed, it comes from the other side of the political spectrum. We owe "alternative facts" to Trump's entourage; this became apparent in the campaigns against so-called "gender ideology" or the absurd rumours propagated by Bolsonaro about Fernando Haddad, his main political rival in the presidential election, planning to introduce "gay kits" in primary schools. On the contrary, academia is defined by the obligation to avoid what Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt called "bullshit". Academic freedom is justified by the obligation we share to avoid bullshit (as much as possible). We have a duty to try and maintain an empirically informed, theoretically consistent approach to the search for truth; it may not be absolute, but we nevertheless pursue it as rigorously as we can. That is actually the reason why academia is under attack: critical thought is the best remedy against bullshit. This explains why the far-right proponents of "alternative facts" hate what we do: academic freedom is the obligation to resist the devaluation of truth.

**AP**: Illlliberal politicians and oligarchs have recognised the importance of educational institutions not only as a means to channel public money into their pockets, but also as sites of knowledge production, authorisation, and transfer that can be used to train loyal supporters and disseminate ideas abroad. There is nothing wrong with being conservative in higher education, but here we are talking about a new phenomenon.

Illiberal forces are hijacking higher education for their own gain and emptying it of values. They need the academic authority granted by these institutions not only to legitimise their ideological agenda, but more importantly to secure employment for loyal supporters. They can then train further supporters who will take over existing educational and research institutions. Scientific arguments are used to support ideological moves. Illiberal politicos also refer to surveys and research conducted by their own "experts", with the difference that the surveys do not meet academic standards and boast neither authorisation from academic institutions nor measurable scientific achievements.

**Is this part of a broader trend of anti-intellectualism across society, or is it a more limited elite strategy to justify reforms and manipulate public opinion for their own ends?**

**AP**: Anti-intellectualism is a modus operandi of illiberal states. It employs a two-pronged strategy: channelling resources from often critical intellectuals to their loyal supporters, and at the same time manipulating vulnerable, underinformed citizens who lack basic critical thinking skills by instrumentalising their existential fears. Universities are attacked and parallel, illiberal universities are founded to create alternative sources of academic authorisation and sites for knowledge production. The creation of knowledge has been transformed from a citizens' right to a security issue. Universities are an easy target for illiberals, who use populist rhetoric to undermine trust in science and scientists.

**EF**: Indeed, anti-intellectualism is the crux of the matter. It plays on anti-elitism. Hence the use of the polemical phrase "gender theory" in France. What this suggests is that gender is just for intellectuals. Indeed, one of the most active groups in France against same-sex marriage and so-called "gender theory" was known as "common sense". Yet another contradiction: for these people, scientific knowledge is supposed to coincide with common sense. However, by definition, critical thought does not.

Does this mean that academic work is elitist? This is a populist argument that would have us believe that the people – the "real people" – do not think. That is a fantasy common to neofascists and neoliberals. In fact, critical thought requires people to be more intelligent. This is a democratic desire: we want people to think on their own. In the face of anti-intellectualism, we need to affirm the importance of intellectual work; not just for us, but for all of society. Of course, education is economically worthwhile. But our main concern should be the democratic value of critical thought, rather than the market value of knowledge. Anti- intellectualism is anti-democratic; academic work should focus on democracy; not just theoretically, but in practice. We have to work on the democratisation of critical thought.

*Our main concern should be the democratic value of critical thought, rather than the market value of knowledge.*
*Éric Fassin*

**Malign foreign influence on the nation is a common theme in these debates. Macron denounces Islamist separatism and American "wokeism", Orbán condemns Western gender and LGBTQI+ "ideology", and British Conservatives fear the influence of continental philosophy. Are these attacks unified by a fear of the Other?**

**AP**: This is not about a fear of the Other, but rather using fear and othering as a policy instrument. Its aim is to create a polarised society that is easy to manipulate and to distract from the state's flaws and dysfunctional policies. As a result of Russia's war against Ukraine, Orbán has lost his allies in the "illiberal international". The anti-gender, anti-LGBTQI+ ideology is a product of [US right-wing Christian coalition] the World Congress of Families, supported – and some claim invented – by Putin as a very cheap but effective tool

of soft diplomacy to undermine liberal values. Those who previously had close connections to this organisation, such as Hungarian President Katalin Novák, need to reinvent themselves in the present European context.

**EF**: "The Other" does not predate political discourses about "others": it results from xenophobia and racism. Indeed, Putin can attack "woke culture" according to an anti-Western logic, but this leads him to support
J.K. Rowling, who is accused of transphobia. Clearly, the West is just a bogeyman. The paradox is that these nationalistic discourses are internationalised in this way. There is an impressive circulation of rhetorical strategies among right-wing foundations, activists, and politicians, which in part explains their incredible success.

Think of how the campaign against "cancel culture" spread like wildfire: the open letter on "justice and open debate" that appeared in Harper's Magazine on 7 July 2020 was published in Le Monde the next day. Even those who imported this polemic acknowledge that "cancel culture" had not really reached France, yet they insisted that in order to resist it, the French should anticipate this threat. Is it about the American "Other", i.e. the fear of Americanisation? Perhaps. But then, what do we make of this tendency to import the vocabulary of the American Right, from "political correctness" 30 years ago to "woke culture" today?

**Is there any truth to the idea that there is a tension between acknowledging the multiplicity of voices and realities, and the necessary consensus required for a society to be cohesive? Is there a tension between a plurality of narratives and experiences and the ideals of universalism?**

**EF**: Universalism is not uniformity. Principles such as liberty and equality are not defined once and for all. On the contrary, they are constantly being renegotiated: that is precisely what is at stake in democratic battles. Take social movements identified by their hashtags: #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. In France, conservatives denounce them as a kind of identity politics that undermines universalist republicanism. Is it not the opposite, though? What undermines the credibility of universalism is when this rhetoric is used to avoid addressing sexism and racism. Fighting discrimination is definitely a democratic agenda. It gives a fuller meaning to words that otherwise risk sounding empty; in particular for those that feel (and are) left out, segregated, relegated, dominated. Indeed, investing abstract words with meaning is what politics is about. Meaning is not a given; it is contested. That is how democratic societies work. Societies evolve as a result of dissensus, not consensus.

**AP**: There are different views on what makes a society strong. But all agree on the importance of feelings of strong belonging. What we see now is that because of the neoliberal project, not only are the institutions such as education or culture that were expected to create that cohesion weakened; the individuals who need to look for resources beyond the state to survive are also atomised. In most cases the family network and women's unpaid care work provide these resources. The illiberal model offers an alternative feeling of belonging based on borders, exclusion, and hate by clearly defining who "we" are, in opposition to "they" who are responsible for all our current problems.

*We academics should engage more in*

*exchanges with social movements.*
*Éric Fassin*

**How do you see this trend developing? What are the most promising strategies to affirm the importance of the humanities and social sciences against both conservative political attacks and neoliberal critiques that argue that they do not bring enough economic utility?**

**EF**: The present is bleak. But the future is up to us: all of us, both within and outside of academia. In practice, I believe we should work in two directions. First, as attacks against academia spread to more and more national contexts, we need to organise internationally, as we have with the Gender International, an academic network of solidarity against reactionary attacks: to disseminate information, to analyse these phenomena beyond the national scale, and to mobilise with greater strength. Second, we academics should engage more in exchanges with social movements; all the more so since politicians have lost interest in both groups. Our job is to help make sense of what is happening; not only to us, but in the world. This is precisely the reason we are under attack.

**AP**: The stakes are high. The polarisation of elite institutions against the rest is not sustainable in the long run. There needs to be a renewal in higher education to reflect demographic trends and current challenges. This is particularly true for countries with illiberal systems; we already see lot of encouraging examples of institutions being founded outside the neoliberal framework of higher education. There are models to revisit from eastern Europe during communism. An example is the flying universities run by intellectuals who were not allowed to teach in the communist-controlled higher education system. Instead they met in informal places, such as private apartments, which became important semi-public spaces of intellectual exchange. These underground enterprises managed to train a generation of intellectuals who played an important role when communism collapsed. For this intellectual freedom, they sacrificed economic prosperity and personal wealth, as well as running the risk of arrest. That will be the key question for the future of tenured professors and higher educational faculty members: do they dare to venture out of the golden cage to try out new ideas, structures, and forms of teaching?

---

[1] Legislation put forward and expedited by the Hungarian government in 2017 that was seen as specifically targeting Budapest's Central European University in order to make it effectively unable to continue to operate in the country.

---

Andrea Pető is a historian specialising in gender at Central European University (CEU) in Vienna, Austria. Her work on gender, politics, the Holocaust, and war has been translated into 23 languages. Her recent publications include *The Women of the Arrow Cross Party: Invisible Hungarian Perpetrators in the Second World War (*Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and *The Forgotten Massacre: Budapest in 1944* (De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2021).

Éric Fassin is a professor of sociology and gender studies at Paris 8 University Vincennes-Saint-Denis. His work focuses on contemporary sexual and racial politics in France, Europe, and the United States. His recent publications include *Populisme: le grand ressentiment* (Éditions Textuel, 2017) and the forthcoming *La Savante et le politique: Défense et illustration des libertés académiques* (Flammarion, 2022), with Caroline Ibos.

Published June 14, 2022
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/studies-in-subversion-the-battle-over-higher-education-in-europe/

*The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.*
*Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.*