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Situating the Feminist Classroom: Between Free Speech and Media Myth

Nicola Rivers

Feminism currently occupies complex and contested terrain in multiple Western contexts, entangled with the rise of populist and post-feminist rhetoric that positions it as both *passé* and irrelevant, yet simultaneously dangerous and subversive. Whilst women's rights are now seemingly *en vogue* and championed by an increasing number of celebrities across multiple media platforms, leading to the emergence of the fourth wave of feminism (Cochrane 2013; Rivers 2017) and the rise of so-called 'neoliberal feminism' (Rottenberg 2018), there has also been a notable resurgence of what Sarah Banet-Wiser has termed 'popular misogyny' (Banet-Wiser 2018: 2). This populist backlash against the emerging fourth wave of feminism plays out across political rhetoric, popular culture and, notably for those of us engaged in feminist pedagogy, across university campuses. As the fourth wave of feminism finds itself caught between a complex, contested popularity and an increasingly hostile populism, the role of feminist pedagogy becomes ever more vital. The feminist classroom is the space to critique, expose and resist insidious narratives that are both anti-education and actively seek to undermine feminist gains. With arguments raging over the role of the contemporary university, this chapter explores how feminism is situated in key debates surrounding free speech and censorious students, currently shaping the perception and provision of higher education.

Within the neoliberal university, where education is viewed as a commodity that can be bought, and students are positioned as 'consumers', courses are increasingly ranked on a series of metrics ostensibly designed to allow students greater insight into the supposed 'value' of their degree. Gender studies, and associated fields within the humanities and social sciences that focus on studying elements of human identity such as race and sexuality, have been much derided as offering little 'value' to students. Noting the impact that this neoliberal landscape has had on certain disciplines, Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad describe this as 'a critical and particularly vulnerable moment in academia' where '[g]lobal capitalism and the growing focus on the sciences lead many universities to adopt market driven models, with numerous departments, mostly within the humanities and social sciences, being closed down' (Taylor and Lahad 2018: 1–2).

In populist narratives courses within the humanities and social sciences are regularly assailed and described as 'Mickey Mouse' degrees or soft subjects, presented as offering students little to no benefit in the purported 'real world'. In an article published by *The Huffington Post*, Lukas Mikelionis takes specific aim at gender studies programmes, claiming 'Mickey mouse degrees are rightfully smack talked down but at least we can defend them on the basis they still teach something remotely valuable and attract a talented bunch. Alas, I cannot say the same about gender studies' (2015: para. 1–2). He goes on to claim that '[t]he evident ludicrousness of gender studies as an academic subject means attracting numerous talented people is off the table' arguing the 'requirements to get into gender studies programme is dumped down [*sic*], and the content is designed to pander very specific groups of people, for the sake of survival' (Mikelionis 2015: para. 7). Mikelionis's attempted 'smack talk' of gender studies offers a critique of the lack of intellectual merit – apparently evident in both the students and the subject – but also presents a post-feminist analysis whereby he expresses supposed concern for otherwise 'high-achieving women who are being radicalized, victimized and then deceived into studying subjects like gender studies' (Mikelionis 2015: para. 10). Of course this argument undermines his previous point that gender studies programmes are failing to attract any talented students in the first place, but it does serve to further a post-feminist position whereby women are presented as high-achieving individuals held back only by a victim mentality fostered by feminism. Within the academy gender studies programmes have also come under attack, being referred to under the pejorative umbrella term of 'grievance studies' (Pluckrose, Lindsay and Boghossian 2018: para. 2), with claims being made about the lack of rigour expressed in the study of such disciplines. The moniker 'grievance studies' apparently signals the propensity for encouraging students to take a divisive view of society predicated on identity politics, or the understanding of certain groups as victimized or subjected to unequal treatment based on their identity.

Yet despite their apparent lack of relevance, importance or impact, such disciplines are not being left to die a quiet death at the hands of market forces, but have also drawn ire from rising right-wing governments. In Hungary, for example, funding for gender studies programmes has been withdrawn based not only on the supposed lack of worth these courses offer, but, somewhat paradoxically, also on the apparent threat they pose to national values. In 2018, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban revoked accreditation and withdrew funding for two gender studies programmes, issuing a statement asserting that, 'The government's standpoint is that people are born either male or female, and we do not consider it acceptable for us to talk about socially constructed genders rather than biological sexes' (Oppenheim 2018: para. 3). Far from being out of touch with 'real' world issues then, gender studies programmes are instead seen to be potentially dangerous sites of subversion, encouraging students to question established norms and pushing the boundaries of 'acceptable' debate.

More recently, critical race theory has also found itself at the heart of political debates in both the UK and United States, with Members of Parliament (MPs) aligning it with protest movements such as Black Lives Matter. In a much-publicized speech in the Houses of Parliament, Conservative MP Kemi Badenoch asserted 'Any school which teaches these elements of critical race theory, or which promotes partisan political views such as defunding the police without

offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law' (Shand-Baptiste 2020: para. 9). As with attacks on gender studies programmes taking a post-feminist position to argue for their irrelevance, and the potential harm caused by supposedly encouraging women to see themselves as victims, Badenoch sought to undermine critical race theory on similar grounds, claiming it as 'an ideology that sees my blackness as victimhood'. Donald Trump's administrations also spoke out against federal funds being used to support teaching critical race theory, suggesting it is 'un-American propaganda' (Victor 2020: para. 1). Again, critical race theory is presented as both outdated and wrong, yet dangerously subversive.

Of course, despite the supposed threat posed by the study of critical race theory, apparently rendering it worthy of outlawing or censorship, the idea of schools or universities overrun with courses dedicated to furthering students' understanding of the role of race can only be considered, in the language of the day, as 'fake news'. In fact, in the UK context, a recent British Sociological Association report (Joseph-Salisbury, Ashe, Alexander, and Champion 2020) stressed that often race and ethnicity are 'taught as an add-on or specialist module, rather than a fundamentally integrated part of the curriculum' (2020: 6). Nonetheless, the perception in popular imagination persists, fuelling the idea of university campuses as radically left-wing, or the frontline of what has been dubbed, the 'culture wars' (Giroux 2005).

However, despite the current heightened political and media interest in what happens on university campuses and across the education sector, such arguments and debates are not new. As Susan Giroux writes, the 'culture wars' can be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s and are a right-wing response to what she suggests could be seen as universities' 'multicultural turn' (Giroux 2005: 315). Of course, Giroux is quick to stress that such a 'turn' was in principle rather than practice, and that despite the 'limp endorsement' of ideals such as 'non-discrimination' and 'diversity', these commitments failed to materialize (2005: 315). However, Giroux also highlights how institutional use of the language of diversity and inclusion, even if not realized, nonetheless fuelled conservative rhetoric about radicalized university campuses. The circulation of these debates within mainstream political and popular discourse then produces a misrepresentation of the education sector, feeding into the political and populist myth of the contemporary university as out of touch with ordinary people or a hotbed of left-wing activism. Although, as Giroux wryly observes, '[i]f we assent, for the moment, to the conservative view of the university as a hotbed of radical thought, we would have to admit that, thus far, it has been devastatingly ineffectual' (2005: 319). Nonetheless, universities find themselves caught in the unenviable and seemingly impossible position of being presented as both the driving force for radical social change, and lumbering institutions held in sway to neoliberal market forces and government sanctioned directives and metrics.

Paradoxically, despite criticism of universities coming from centralized government sources like Badenoch and Trump, such pronouncements ironically further a sense of distrust with the establishment, positioning those who make these statements as rogue outsiders prepared to tell the uncomfortable truth. This feeds into a political populism, fuelling what Tom Nichols has diagnosed as the 'death of expertise' in his 2014 article of the same name, and subsequent book, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*. Nichols laments the turn against expertise and established knowledge, seemingly primarily because of the challenge it presents to his assertion that, as an expert, he can and should expect that his 'opinion holds more weight than that of most other people' (2014: para. 1). However, his work is certainly not a robust defence of universities as he currently sees them. In fact, Nichols lays at least some of the blame for public distrust in expertise with universities themselves, characterizing them as 'soft' (2017) and run by academics enslaved by the whims of students.

Despite purportedly different aims then, with academics from within the academy mourning the death of expertise and politicians celebrating this expediency, each discourse amounts to the same thing: the questioning of what takes place on university campuses, what counts as knowledge and, critically, who gets to decide. Feminist classrooms and critical race theory courses are thus caught in a double-sided attack. Criticized from 'outside' by politicians who are ostensibly seeking to protect students – and perhaps more pertinently, the status quo – from unwanted exposure to gender studies, or critical race theory, which is forced upon them by academics and their left-wing agenda, and from within as lacking academic rigour or bowing to student demands in terms of diversifying the curriculum. Again, gender studies and critical race theory are somehow simultaneously outdated or irrelevant forms of expertise linked to 'soft' science and derided within the academy, mocked by the publication of spoof articles, and yet also a threat to social orthodoxy and cohesion. What critical race theory and feminist pedagogy have in common then, alongside their demonization by conservative or right-leaning governments, is an attempt to examine race and gender in relation to the structural confines and pressures of culture, history and the law. Crucial to both is an acknowledgement that race and gender will shape our lived realities to some extent.

Contemporary students find themselves caught in a similar paradox; frequently presented as 'snowflake millennials' lacking the resilience and ambition to thrive in the modern world, yet simultaneously accused of threatening the survival of free speech or liberal democracy through the use of 'trigger' warnings and 'no-platforming' (Webster and Rivers 2018). As with all of these debates, arguments around free speech on university campuses, or what is currently referred to as 'cancel culture', are not new, in fact, there has been a no-platform policy for racists and fascists implemented by the UK Students Union since 1974. Although presently being afforded increasing public

attention and column inches in mainstream media, questions about the limits on debate placed by students, or the rights of lecturers to express what could euphemistically be described as ‘controversial’ or ‘unpopular’ opinions (and less euphemistically as racism, homophobia and sexism), have circulated for at least the last forty years. Again, much of the discussion has centred around the caricature of university campuses as overtly left-wing or liberal – with the focus often being on issues around diversity and inclusion – and attempting to stifle the expression of conservative or right-wing views.

Media headlines have gleefully reported sensationalist stories about censorious students. In 2015, for example, Goldsmiths, the University of London’s Welfare and Diversity officer, Bahar Mustafa, achieved notoriety in the national – and to a lesser degree, international – press, for her attempts to organize a Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and non-binary people only event on campus. News outlets from across the political spectrum, from *The Guardian* to *The Daily Mail* were quick to run stories questioning the merits, or even validity, of Mustafa setting up such an event. Headlines such as ‘Anger after white people and men are banned from “anti-racism” rally at British university by its own student union DIVERSITY OFFICER’ (Harding 2015), revelled in the apparent controversy and irony of the supposedly ‘racist’ and ‘sexist’ diversity officer discriminating against white students, and fuelling what Hamilton Carroll has referred to as the perception of white injury (Carroll 2014).

The notion that creating a safe space for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, as well as those who identify as non-binary, to meet and discuss their experiences was somehow beyond the remit of Bahar Mustafa’s role as Goldsmiths Welfare and Diversity officer, or indeed in conflict with her position, was risible. However, such was the strength of feeling against Mustafa and her attempts to provide students with this space, that a change.org petition was created calling for Mustafa to be ‘removed from Goldsmiths University in all aspects with police interaction and degree revocation’ (Keene 2015: para. 1). This received in excess of 26,000 supporters, highlighting the popularity, if not credibility, of this position.

Andy Keene, the creator of the petition, argued that Mustafa was guilty of ‘hate speech’ (Keene 2015). He suggested this was evident both in the wording she used to promote the event, urging, if ‘you’re a man and/or white, PLEASE DON’T COME’, and later in her posting a photograph of herself next to sign that read, ‘No White-Cis-Men Pls’. Not content with seeking that Mustafa be removed from her post at Goldsmiths, Keene argued that the ‘seriousness’ of Mustafa’s ‘crime’ could warrant the involvement of the European courts on charges of ‘inciting racial hatred and genocide’ (Keene 2015: para. 8). The Metropolitan Police confirmed that Mustafa was interviewed under caution following a complaint, however, Keene was unsuccessful in his attempts to get Mustafa removed from her position. A separate vote conducted by the university failed to get sufficient support to force a referendum, and thus she held her post. No criminal charges have been brought against her. Nonetheless, Mustafa’s case was presented as an example of the apparent problem of identity politics overrunning UK university campuses, and the seemingly inevitable fallout from a left-wing preoccupation with so-called ‘grievance studies’. However, the very fact that organizing a small, on-campus event that excludes those who frequently hold the most power in our society – white, cisgender men and women – made the news at all, in fact highlights what a rarity this kind of action is.

Debates around no-platforming have also been particularly prevalent in contemporary feminism too, often coming to the fore on university campuses. Students at Cardiff University, for example, sought to have Germaine Greer’s invitation to speak there rescinded due to her hostile perspective on trans people. Similarly, Julie Bindel was banned from an event taking place at Manchester University following concerns expressed that her views may ‘incite hatred towards, and exclusion of [.] trans students’ (Whibly 2015). More recently still, although not linked to universities, columnist Suzanne Moore resigned her position at *The Guardian*, citing bullying by her colleagues there and censorship over her views on trans women, claiming that contemporary feminism has lost its way or is newly divided.

However, defence for Moore has come from the perhaps unlikely ally of the right-wing paper, *The Spectator*, with Scottish Editor, Alex Massie suggesting *The Guardian* would be ‘diminished’ without her. Aligning those that complained about Moore’s column on the grounds that it perpetuated a hostile environment for trans people, and specifically those working at *The Guardian*, with infantile and censorious students, Massie writes:

‘I read something in the paper and disagreed with it’ now often seems to be considered some kind of assault upon the person, rather than being something you should expect – and even look forward to. Perhaps this should not surprise for when personal is political and when identity is the basis for politics a mere difference of opinion – or even emphasis – becomes a hostile act. Such things must be policed. Which might be fine on campus but the adult world is supposed to be marginally more robust.

(Massie 2020: para. 5)

This is a curious defence of Moore, whose own explanation of leaving the paper is rooted in her commitment to the idea that the personal is political and, indeed, stressed that: ‘[t]he truth is I never fitted in at the *Guardian*. The personal is political the moment you don’t feel clean enough’ (Moore 2020).

In an attempt to co-opt Moore’s resignation to further serve debates around free speech and censorious students then, Massie empties the situation of its political content, and in so doing undermines the complexity of contemporary

feminisms. Massie's simplistic and reductive argument is seemingly that all speech is good speech. At best, feminist debates over what constitutes a woman are dismissed as generational (Rivers 2017), at worst, entirely ignored. Rather than acknowledging the seriousness of the mounting criticism against Moore's position on the inclusion of trans women within women-only spaces, Massie aligns those complaining with the easily assailable 'snowflake' student, again feeding into dominant narratives of university campuses as overrun by 'woke' millennials intent on limiting free speech and creating classrooms that are 'safe spaces'. Such a view of students not only refuses to engage with the very real concerns they raise, but also presents a homogenizing and clearly unrepresentative view of the student body, and millennials in general. As Alison Winch, Jo Littler and Jessalynn Keller have argued: '[m]illennials are not a homogeneous group, and their socioeconomic and cultural location is dependent on gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, religion and place' (Winch, Littler and Keller 2016: 563).

Sara Ahmed has argued, students' concerns – whether real or imagined – are more easily dismissed by presenting the students themselves as overly-sensitive or demanding. Aligning students with what she has termed 'willful subjects' (2014), Ahmed argues: 'What protestors are protesting *about* can be ignored when the protestors are assumed to be suffering from too much will; they are assumed to be opposing something because they are *being oppositional*' (2015: para. 4). Ahmed also highlights a fundamental misunderstanding in mainstream media discussions of terms such as 'trigger warnings' and 'safe spaces' as they relate to students. Far from being a sign that debate or difficult discussions have been abandoned at the demands of the sensitive and censorious student, the inclusion of 'trigger warnings' and creation of 'safe spaces' exist precisely so these discussions can still take place. As Ahmed stresses: 'safe spaces are another technique for dealing with the consequences of histories that are not over [. . .]. The real purpose of these mechanisms is to enable difficult conversations to happen' (2015: para. 23).

Nonetheless, the idea that universities have succumbed to the demands of censorious – and frequently feminist – students persists in the public imagination. Yet a recent report from the Policy Institute at King's College London (Grant, Hewlett, Nir and Duffy 2019) found that only 12 per cent of students had heard of incidents of this freedom being threatened frequently at their own university, and 46 per cent had never heard of any instances on campus. Demonstrating the longevity of these concerns – if not their validity – Stanley Fish's collection of essays, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech: And It's a Good Thing Too*, cites a 1991 survey, *Campus Trends*, as concluding that 'despite "anecdotal accounts" "problems are not widespread." Ninety per cent of all institutions report no "controversies over the political or cultural content of remarks made by invited speakers"' (Fish 1994: 53–4). Fish's point, however, was not that there was no debate taking place, or even that there was no cause for debate, but rather he questioned the terms of discussion surrounding free speech, and the assertion that it is the political left seeking to limit what can be said or taught.

Fish questioned what advocates of free speech were actually seeking, noting that on all sides of the debate parameters are drawn around what can or can't be said in public spaces, and that the rationale for these decisions is, of course, inherently political. And yet the very notion of being political was, and indeed still is, often framed as an accusation, and seen as an indication of a biased or partisan approach to speech. This accusation is most frequently levelled at a left-wing that are accused of having abandoned rational thought in favour of political correctness or bowing to the demands of identity politics. As Fish stresses, 'what we have here, then, is not, as has been advertised, a brave resistance to politics by the apolitical rationality but rather an argument between two forms of politics, or if you prefer, two forms of political correctness' (1994: 56).

The framing of advocates of free speech as rational and politically neutral casts them as defenders of uncomfortable truths, whilst positioning those arguing for limits on who and what should occupy public discourse as partisan and political. Those who would limit free speech are presented as overly sensitive at best, and at worst, hiding from arguments they know they can't win. As Ahmed has argued, students demanding a say over who does and does not take up valuable space and resources on university campuses are thus not portrayed as engaged and critical independent thinkers – which would surely be the ideal type – but rather as 'snowflakes' frightened of honest debate and challenge.

What is so useful about Fish's earlier intervention into debates on free speech is his illuminating the role of politics and the limits placed on freedom of expression across political divides. How else to read Badenoch's assertion that critical race theory has no place on UK campuses, or Trump's threat to withdraw federal funds from institutions that continue to offer critical race theory in their classrooms, than as an attack on free speech on university campuses? This is despite Badenoch's Conservative values more commonly aligning with the argument for wholly unfettered freedom of expression. Indeed, her pronouncements on the illegality of critical race theory came after Education minister, Gavin Williams, announced a Higher Education Restructuring Regime requiring institutions to 'demonstrate their commitment to academic freedom and free speech' in order to benefit fully from government support following the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Donald Trump has frequently taken to Twitter to threaten to withdraw funds from institutions he sees as limiting freedom of expression, for example, in 2017 asking the presumably rhetorical question of: 'If UC Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view – no federal funds?' (Bay Area News Group 2017). It seems then even the staunchest defenders of academic freedoms and freedom of expression are happy to place limits on these ideals when it is they who are being offended.

Yet more recently – and somewhat disappointingly – in an apparent attempt to defend the position of the university in post-truth and populist times, Fish has also fallen into blaming students for imperilling the place of experts. Despite having written compellingly about the misconceptions surrounding the place of politics on university campuses, and the influence of this on debates surrounding free speech, Fish now decries what he describes as the ‘rhetoric of virtue’ and students as ‘virtue monitors’ (Fish 2019: 78). Writing on students he dismissively suggests: ‘[i]n short, they don’t want to learn anything’ (2019: 77). In an assessment of the student population that bears remarkable similarities to the caricatures so skilfully illustrated by Ahmed – as the consuming, complaining, over-sensitive or censorious type (Ahmed 2015) – Fish takes particular aim at ‘activist students (situated largely on the left) who lobby for a role in the formation of the curriculum and in the choice of texts to be included in the syllabus of a particular course’ (Fish 2019: 73). Rather than seeing this as evidence of students’ engagement with what they study, whereby they are demonstrating an admirable awareness of the way social inequalities have historically shaped, and continue to shape the accepted canon of knowledge and the content of course syllabus, he instead presents this as a refusal to learn.

However, Fish also maintains that much of what is characterized in media discussions as infringements of free speech on campus, have little to do with free speech at all, and instead revolve around the questions of professionalism and what the university is for. Fish’s response to the increasingly hostile political environment that universities find themselves operating in is to retreat from politics. He argues:

Of course it is true that universities are politically *situated*: everything about them, from their incorporation to their funding, their tax status, and the state services they rely on, is enmeshed in politics. But that is quite different from saying that those who work inside universities should conduct themselves as political actors. It is one thing to be embedded in a structure made possible by political activities; it is quite another to be acting as a political agent within that structure. The first is unavoidable; the second, I think, is to be avoided no matter what the temptation.

(2019: 86)

This argument appears to be predicated on survival – as Fish asserts ‘the university that rigorously distances itself from politics will be at once true to its mission and more likely to prosper politically’ (87) – but it is clearly not survival for all. Sacrificed on the altar of Fish’s ideal university would surely be gender studies programmes, and courses including critical race theory, for fear of seeming too ‘political’. It also hints at a nostalgia for an imagined university of the past, described by Fish as ‘the life of disinterested contemplation’ (77) where the politics of the day presumably held no influence over who was doing the contemplating or what was contemplated.

Defunding the feminist classroom, or banning the teaching of critical race theory does not just signal a retreat from politics though, but rather a retreat from reality. Far from being a hotbed of left-wing activism, arguably universities are nowhere near radical enough. Universities UK, for example, have just seen fit to publish a report specifically intended to deal with ‘the widespread evidence of racial harassment found on university campuses’ by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (UK Universities 2019). The turn to a right-wing populism and the associated calls of ‘fake news’ and post-truth, as Marie Moran and Jo Littler contend, are not simply a ‘cultural backlash’ but are at least in part fostered by a neoliberal attack including ‘the eroding of public institutions required for a functioning democracy’ and the ‘hollowing out or serious undermining of: an inclusive and objective media’ and ‘an education system fostering critical thinking’ (Moran and Littler 2020: 866). What is needed on university campuses is more critical race theory, and more feminist classrooms, not less. From accusations of silencing, and arguments over the boundaries of free speech, to questions over the value of education and the importance of expertise in an apparently ‘post-truth’ society, a commitment to teaching feminist and critical race theory demonstrates a commitment to an understanding of education as transformative. To rework Giroux’s earlier cited assertion that ‘if we assent, for the moment, to the conservative view of the university as a hotbed of radical thought, we would have to admit that, thus far, it has been devastatingly ineffectual’ (Giroux 2005: 315), it’s perhaps time we got a little better at it.

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