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## **Critical Academy under Attack:**

### **A Panel Discussion**

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### **Abstract**

Scholars working within different critical theory traditions are not unfamiliar with the experience of encountering dismissive representations of their work, including from parts of the academy that disavow the politics of academic research and knowledge production. However, the political project of delegitimizing critical research and scholarship seems to be intensifying. Signifiers like “critical theory”, “critical race theory” and “gender theory” have become objects of antagonism and moral panic for a diverse cast of political, cultural and media actors, including self-styled academic dissidents with audiences well beyond the academy. In tandem, critical scholarship faces an increasingly inhospitable ecology within the neoliberal university, even while the latter simultaneously brands itself in the language of social justice. Chaired and introduced by Gavan Titley, the panel contributions from Sahana Udupa, Éric Fassin, and Diana Mulinari reflect on the challenges faced by critical scholars and critical scholarship in a time of emboldened reactionary politics. It asks how these challenges might be intellectually and politically confronted, and countered, in light of the special issue’s reflections on the current condition of critique.

### **Keywords**

Anti-intellectualism, critique, critical theory, far-right attacks, (neo)fascism, neoliberal university, counter-strategies, violence, scientism, positivism, hope, race, gender

## Editors' note

This article is based on a transcript of the final plenary panel of the International Communication Association (ICA) pre-conference held at Université Paris Nanterre on May 25, 2022 on which this special issue is based. The chair and the three panellists were given an opportunity to check and review their original comments. The questions (“Q”) and audience contributions are anonymized but were edited and revised for clarity.

**Gavan Titley (GT):** Good afternoon and welcome. I teach in a university in Ireland, where, when political attacks are launched on universities or on researchers, or more specifically, on humanities or social science scholarship, the political dismissal is fairly predictable – such research is useless, it has no relevance to the real world. This panel is about political attacks on universities and researchers, but it’s driven by a very different idea, that the relation and relevance of scholarship to the world is *all too real*. Universities, the current, excitable story goes, are no longer institutions marked by scholarly detachment or scientific disinterest. They are instead incubators of ideological domination, dedicated to destroying the natural order, inducing national shame and white guilt, prising open borders, unfairly rewriting history and imposing concepts on societies at large.

Of course, these modes of political attack have long co-existed and intertwined with each other. Universities can be framed as both wasted resources and a waste of resources. In this perception, they refuse to commit to instrumental goals and have an impact in and on the “real world”. At the same time, in a telling extension of the trickle-down imaginary, they foist ideas on society, doing all sorts of violence to common sense. However, if there is a more novel dimension of this political targeting – and we’ll get into many dimensions of this in our panel discussion – it is the transnational synchronicity of these attacks. In introduction, what I propose is novel in this context is the strange alliances that have emerged in and through these attacks, and, importantly, the ferocity of the assault itself: the desire to extract real personal, professional and institutional costs. Allow me to mention some initial examples.

In the United States, there is a history of very well-resourced attacks on “liberal universities” and scholarship. This has, if anything, ramped up in the post-Trump period, with the manufactured hysteria about the putative anti-white agitation of

critical race theory, travelling, in about 18 months, from opportunistic Republican attempts to delegitimise Black Lives Matter activists, to featuring in the so-called manifesto of a racist mass murderer.

In France, the appalling murder in October 2020 of Samuel Paty, a *collège* or secondary school teacher, not only informed another round of political attacks on Muslim associations and civic life in the name of combating separatism. It also led to an intensive scapegoating of academics held guilty of *Islamogauchisme*, or “Islam-leftism”, a term that the data scientist David Chavalarias, in a study of its usage on Twitter, suggested was primarily confined to far-right accounts until it started to appear in the political pronouncements of government ministers during 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Where US reaction has long been happy to blame the import of French theory for all kinds of ills, the then-education minister Jean Michel Blanquer – or John Michael Whiter, as somebody quipped earlier – blamed political dissolution in the Republic on “indigenous racist and decolonial ideologies imported from North America”. In the United Kingdom a more episodic but no less nasty campaign by the Tory party has designated universities as unsafe for free speech, requiring forms of legal intervention into academic freedom. This is a very particular and important juxtaposition.

This accusation does not, of course, reference the systematic attempts to restrict and undermine academic freedom and freedom of speech through institutional rationalisation, precarious employment, marketisation and exploitative levels of overwork. Nor does it address, in the UK context, the consequences of the sectarian Prevent agenda, which enacts punitive surveillance on racialised students in the name of preventing “radicalisation”. It means for the most part that the favourite house eugenicists of the reactionary right feel uncomfortable speaking on university campuses when their presence is protested.

Outside of these major sites of contemporary reaction, comparable attacks and related strategies are playing through all the time. Migration researchers in Denmark have been kept under journalistic surveillance and accused of stoking all forms of anti-Danish sentiment. In Finland, youth members of the True Finns party deliberately enrol in the modules of history and social science lecturers to report on the importation of “woke

content” and to expose the lectures to public opprobrium through outraged performance on social media.

So, what's going on? How can we make sense of this transnational synchronicity with respect to these different intensities and ideological coordinates? What is the relation in these processes between a substantive assault on universities-in-themselves and on universities as mediating objects for a wider backlash against Black Lives Matter, social movements and political contestation *tout court*? Is it an expression also of political anxiety, a reaction against a perceived lack of traction on the right, in generational and ideological terms, and against the implacable lived multiculturalism of our societies? How is all of this folded into the reproduction of paranoid nationalisms today?

Perhaps we also need to account for an apparent contradiction. While we have quite rightly focused today on the marginality of critique, this popular reactionary fantasy focuses on its presumed power, on the influence of critical theory. It is presumed to do something in the world, and it needs to be stopped. And, finally, we need to think about how and in what ways we combat these assaults in the context of the marketisation and the casualisation of academic work, both in terms of the analytical work we do for understanding these assaults, and the forms of practical solidarity that we can engage in.

Joining us to discuss this context, we have three very distinguished guest panellists, with deep personal experiences of this backlash. Speaking first, we will have Sahana Udupa, from Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. Speaking after Sahana will be Éric Fassin from University Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint Denis. And joining us over a Zoom link will be Diana Molinari from Lund University. We will have a 10 minute or so contribution from each of the speakers, then a brief panel discussion to pick through some of these similarities and differences, before opening to the floor, as I imagine people will have plenty to say on these issues in the room as well. So, with that, I invite Sahana to speak first. Thank you.

**Sahana Udupa (SU):** Thank you so much. I think I’m going to repeat fascinating points that have come up today in different panels and also in Gavan’s great introduction. He has talked about transnational resonance, synchronicity, and intensification. These are very important points to consider. I will add by sharing some

insights from our extreme speech research (see Udupa, 2019) but will also discuss some experiences of navigating this space – of right-wing political cultures and the European academy – for more than 12 years now.

Often when I discuss extreme speech research, I also bring forth my experiential insights, which sometimes surprise people here in Europe. I remember a German journalist once came to me, as she wanted to ask me questions about extreme speech. She looked quite surprised that I would also foreground my experiences since she appeared to believe it would not be “scientific” to engage in one’s own experiences as a researcher. It is this kind of knowledge setting that implicitly or explicitly advocates for cold analytical distance that researchers have to contend with (and disrupt) while also taking up difficult topics such as right-wing cultures as the main subject of study.

So let me begin with one observation, which I fear is going to be a repetition. But I think there is rhetorical power to repetition, and it is also a way to reiterate a point for greater clarity, and for our own conviction in this critical space. For as long as I could, I avoided Twitter because I thought (and I still think) that the accelerated temporality of Twitter can hinder the slow temporality of academic reflection, self-critique, referencing and correction that often occur in loops before giving shape to a fine point of argument. But something else was bothering me as well. My ethnographic work is on right-wing ideologues and enthusiasts, and I have a lingering anxiety about not getting interviews with them if I were very vocal on social media. What if they cancel the interview appointments? They might look me up on the internet and decide I am going to be a troublemaker.

The other anxiety, of course, is what if I’m trolled? It is not uncommon for online right-wing warriors to go after academics they consider incompatible with their worldview. Despite such anxieties, I felt compelled to be on Twitter partly for research but also, as you might have experienced, there is this new logic of declaring solidarity with our fellow colleagues by mentioning and liking their posts and promoting our own work. This is the new citational logic that has emerged with Twitter and other social media, urging us to partake of it and participate in it willingly or otherwise. So, when I recently lost my older Twitter account, I reluctantly started a new account, although I had thought academic colleagues would quit the platform en masse after the Musk takeover.

On one of those “fieldwork” days, I noticed a slew of tweets aimed against an academic based in the UK. The academic has a “migration background” and is employed at a prestigious UK university. I saw a flurry of activity on her Twitter feed, pointing to a recent tweet in which she had directly criticised a popular best-selling author known for his pro-Brexit views. In this tweet she had directly, and in no uncertain terms, called this pro-Brexiteer a regressive retrograde. And in response, there was a barrage of tweets calling her a race baiter, a race hustler, woke extremist, and numerous other derogatory epithets and names. I tried to gather all these tweets, defining it as a troll episode, and thought about the methodological question around delineating and demarcating it for analysis. Our initial analysis found that 46% of the comments drew direct reference to the two protagonists who were the key figures in the discussion. It was hence tempting to frame the episode as two public figures at loggerheads. However, when we move beyond this first impression, we see that the left liberal critic in question was a symbol for the racial other – all that is wrong in the UK and all that could pose a danger to white privilege, secured in this instance, by the logics of the nation state.

I noticed one other word, which was quite intriguing. One commentator remarked that, “People like her are like uranium and thorium. They’re radioactive without reason.” The expressions were admittedly hilarious. Such word games that elicit humour are critical to right-wing online cultures today. I have theorised “fun as a meta practice of extreme speech” since it is a serious aspect of right-wing ideological practices, encompassing hilarity in social exchange, colloquialism in political discourse, and strategic textual practices that can help evade regulatory filters as well as efforts to trend topics online that can bring satisfaction of achievement. What was intriguing in this case was that “radioactive” was the exact expression that podcaster Sam Harris in the US invited his academic guest to comment upon. This academic guest is known for his open opposition to critical race and gender studies. He is a marketing specialist who specialises in evolutionary psychology. In the podcast, he laps up the word and heaps on many more labels. He adds that, as an insider to the academy, he cannot sit idly by “while the humanities and some of the social sciences are being infested with movements that are genuinely grotesque to human reason; they are an affront to human decency”. These are strong words.

Here, we see a kind of resonance between so-called academic dissidents – I picked up that word from the preconference abstract – and right-wing actors outside the academy. And one can give many more examples. We were talking to a right-wing activist in Germany, who used the word “Gutmensch”, which would literally translate into “good people”, but he translated it as “social justice warriors”. He said when he gets bored in the evening, he goes online where he gets to meet “Gutmensch” and he trolls them for fun. Derogatory labeling of “social justice warriors” resonates across the different national scenarios in Europe we have examined.

Yet another right-wing term is “normie”. In India, we found a Hindu nationalist meme which shows a gang of men wielding sticks around a wounded man on the ground who is accused of consuming beef [framed as unacceptable for Hindu religious tradition]. One of the attackers exclaims in Hinglish: “*Offend kyu ho rabe ho? Normie ho kya?*” [Why are you getting offended, are you a normie?] Anthropologist Peter Hervik (2011) has documented that this same word resonates strongly in the Danish far right. “Normie” is a derogatory label used for people accused as being naive, gullible and stubborn in their insistence on social justice.

Such expressions and practices bundled around them are turning discriminatory language into juvenile joviality. I’m bringing up these examples to give us a sense of how there are convergences and resonances between academic dissidents, conservative academics or classical academics – not sure which is the appropriate word – and far-right activists outside academia. This intersection is worrying.

As part of ethnographic work among German right-wingers, we talked to young online users who are part of the AfD [right-wing party Alternativ für Deutschland] and the Identitarian Movement. We met one such supporter at a cafe, with whom we had a long discussion. At the end of our conversation, when I asked him about his current occupation, he said he is a student of political science in the same university where I research and teach. I did not have to meet him outside at a cafe. He was right there; he comes to the same building that I go to for work. This raises the question around what is being taught and learnt in the name of political science and what cultures are encouraged or tolerated, if unwittingly, on campus. The convergence of neo-conservative academic perspectives with right-wing ideologies is a trend that warrants our concern.



Direct attacks based on shared right-wing rhetorics are one type, but opposition to critical thinking in academia can take different forms. Sometimes, it is not “trolling” in a straightforward sense of the term but expressed more in the manner of impatience or antagonism cloaked as erudite opposition. In one instance, I had presented a paper on decoloniality and extreme speech and one scholar commented that “coloniality” is a “macro historical mouthful”. The subtext here is positivist anthropology and its scrupulous attention to micro details. And, therefore, when you invoke a framework like coloniality, you are accused of sweeping away those details. In another instance, a reviewer for a prestigious funding agency asked me why I should bring up a “side issue” like coloniality in discussions about extreme speech, since the focus should be on corporate social media. The subtext here is class analysis and market critique (implicitly urging to avoid frames that are assumed to “distract” this core critical lens). In the third instance, in the comments section for a video on extreme speech on YouTube, a commentator was asking why a university where I am employed, which is known for its excellence in medical research, is featuring and promoting people like us who bring unnecessary issues. The subtext here is the legitimacy of the researcher, or perhaps the message is that the researcher might be legitimate but she is in the wrong place – the sort of racism that Peter Hervik (2011) defines as “neo-racism” – nobody is inferior but, if you are in the wrong place, you have to be prepared to face negative consequences.

In the fourth instance, when a Peruvian anthropologist from the US was talking about environmental activism at a colloquium, a distinguished colleague, as I understood it, asked her why the speaker was portraying environmental activists as though they are not embedded in any ambivalent political relations and motivations. Isn’t it the responsibility of the researcher to capture this nuance – to politicize rather than moralize and do analysis rather than wear the activist hat? In this instance, the subtext is the legitimacy of activist interlocutors as social actors, and thereby of critical research itself. The anticipation here is of a pure moral subject position, and when actors are somehow contaminated with contradictions, their legitimacy cannot be taken for granted, and as researchers, our primary goal is to document contradictions in the name of “nuanced ethnography”. Otherwise, it would be activism.

Drawing a distinction between activism and research is yet another way of delegitimising critical thinking, and I do not understand how scrupulous attention to micro details conflicts with a macro historical view of power structures. I do not understand how our methodological commitment to understanding nuances and contradictions should forego the cumulative progressive action of what our actors are trying to achieve in their lived words.

I have just listed some instances of how critical thinking gets attacked within the university space. On the one hand, neoliberal force is weighing on and reshaping universities. On the other hand, when we bring the radar beneath this vast cross-cultural force, we notice different ways in which problematic views are converging.

In these instances, there is an active effort to sidestep and dismiss coloniality or decolonial thinking, even as we are asking ourselves about the proper vocabularies that can raise incisive questions and pry open what we observe with historical insight and critical thinking. Sometimes I have doubted if I am eligible to use the word “decolonial thinking” considering my own privileged position as an upper caste, educated scholar from a so-called postcolony, or whether my vulnerabilities within the metropole and an almost-white only university space constitutes a reflexive ground to push for decoloniality as a generative critique and provocation. We are also deeply aware of nativist and xenophobic projects that are expanding in the global South in the name of “decolonialization”.

But what is clear is that opposition to critical thinking and attempts to delegitimize coloniality, race and gender as critical concepts are now finding strange bedfellows – academics inside the university and right-wing actors outside the academy who use podcasts, tweets, trolling, tagging, archiving and so on to not only destabilize critique as an academic practice but also the very grounds on which critical scholars do their analytical work and forge alliances.

This brings us to the question of digital mediation, which has come up several times in this conference. How do we understand this? There are many different theories – about reverberation, about layered anonymity, about platform migration. I think all these are valid. But I will talk about one particular point, which is quite widely debated in anthropology – the trope of “field” and its contrast “home”. In anthropology, a key

feature that distinguishes “home” from the “field” is a sense of calm security that “home” offers the researcher. Therefore, with the “security” of the “home”, you’re able to enter, explore and observe the field. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson’s (1997) seminal essay highlights, we may note the spatial notions of “entering” the field and “coming back” to the calm security of the home.

In the colonial context, this calm security was secured with conquest and submission. Epistemological and evaluative perspectives were imposed upon research subjects, which went largely unchallenged because of the oppressive conditions in which knowledge was framed, “subjects” were enlisted and information was extracted. Interestingly, digital mediation has productively upset the modalities of exit and observation and the comfort of the home versus entering a field. Today’s social media has created what we define as “networked exposure” in the *Digital Unsettling* book (Udupa and Dattatreya, 2023). It’s a condition where research is drawn into continuous, evolving and shifting webs of connection, which demand our agility, attention and quick reciprocal action. On one level, this has created opportunities for us, as researchers, to become answerable to our interlocutors because there are several ways in which they are following us online and demanding to know what we are up to. This has offered us with the means to clarify the ethical and political stakes of our research projects.

I think, on another level, researchers who recognise the subversive potential of this networked exposure also acknowledge that when we turn to oppressive politics as a research field, such exposure can raise several risks and challenges. I just mentioned trolling as one such risk which injects vexing vulnerability. This vulnerability, to close my comments, is not evenly felt. It’s not the same for everyone.

For those of us – so called transnational immigrant scholars – it is even more difficult I think, because we have to simultaneously deal with scepticism about critical concepts such as coloniality or the patronizing gestures of the “hosts” or narrow expectations of “scientism”, and right-wing influences within the academy and on the street which amplify the perpetual uncertainty that haunts the digital space.

This is not an alarmist approach. This is not happening everywhere and not to the same degree. We are still able to practice our academic craft of analysis and voicing.

However, some clear shifts in higher education policies – of which I am eagerly waiting to hear more in this panel discussion – have shown that the bickering that was brewing on social media, which is itself a reflection of longer histories of subjugation and oppression, is now beginning to shape policy and affect research. We need to be prepared on different fronts. Thank you.

**GT:** Thank you so much. You’ve brought up so much that I won’t try to summarise it now. We’ll hold questions until we have all the presentations, but I would underline how you emphasize the centrality of coloniality to the current moment and how this is critical to the politicisation of academic freedom within universities. Among other things, it animates a certain media-friendly conservatism within universities, where certain figures tap into the potential to play the sort of “dissident inside”, whistleblowing on the kinds of madness being facilitated within institutions and benefiting from that in the public sphere. So, there’s so much there to work our way through. However, I will give the floor now to Éric, thank you very much.

**Éric Fassin (EF):** My remarks are about free speech and academic freedom, and attacks against academic knowledge, critical thought, etc. This is not just about France, of course: it is a phenomenon that affects many countries. I’ve been working with people in Brazil, and in Turkey, and in other countries, who know a great deal about all this, including on a personal level. But since I will be talking about academia, perhaps I should start with this contextual fact: I just heard that in order (I assume) to protect us against students, the doors outside are locked. As you may know, there are students, or indeed non-students (*“les sans-fac”* who could not enrol), that are not only demonstrating, but also occupying parts of this university.

What is going on in universities today is not just about “exotic” places like Hungary (of course, when I say this, it’s ironic), Turkey, or Brazil. Exoticism starts in Sciences Po. Grenoble and in Paris 8 where I teach. So, I think we have to include what is going on in France, not as a way of saying it’s more important, but since I speak here, I will focus on where I speak from. At the same time, I will not engage in too much first-person narrative. I first thought, since I’m talking to people who are interested in communication, that maybe I could discuss attacks that I have experienced on social media. But I think it’s better, after all, that I should talk about the efforts that we’ve been making for a counterattack as academics. We’ve organised a conference and

we've edited a free e-book on all these attacks. We have also started an *abécédaire* that defines keywords, not only on a blog but also on Instagram (for me, this was quite new: I did not quite know how to deal with it. But some of our younger friends seem to manage quite well!)

So, we've been trying to find ways to counterattack, not in the sense of attacking certain persons, of course, but in the sense of producing knowledge that spreads outside the walls of academia. And that, I think, is one of the main issues at the moment. The attacks on academia come from both within and outside of academia. Therefore, our intellectual counterattacks should also be both within and outside of academia.

After this long introduction, let me start with the idea of critique. I have tried in the last few years to think about a strange thing that's happened to critique. In the "good old days", that is when I was young, critique was about unveiling. The intelligence of critique (Marxism, psychoanalysis, etc.) revealed that which otherwise could not be perceived by everyone. It was all about seeing through or behind appearances. But these days, the work of critique has become quite complicated. That's because things are very much in the open. If you're talking about Trump, if you're talking about Bolsonaro, if you're talking about Zemmour, and many others, what are you going to reveal to people that they don't know already? Perhaps you still have to convince a few people that Éric Zemmour, who is Jewish, is also an anti-Semite. But apart from that, on the whole, people get it: he is sexist, homophobic, racist, and xenophobic. And that's precisely why there are many who like him. That's why people like Trump. That's why they like Bolsonaro, etc. It's not because they don't know, it's because they *do* know.

So, what's left for critique? What do we do if we're revealing that which is hidden in plain sight? Fortunately, at the very same time, something has happened: so-called populism, which I prefer to call neofascism, has systematically attacked critical thinking. This means that at a time when we have wondered if we might have become irrelevant, kindly enough, the people who hate us demonstrated that indeed we do matter. We didn't know they cared. But they did. And, so, the paradox today is that, while unveiling may have become irrelevant, while we're not sure exactly whether critique remains useful, those who attack us seem to know. If some people hate us, it

must mean that we're doing something right. Not everything, of course, but something. That's my reassuring moment.

Now, what is it that they're attacking? Many years ago, I played with a concept by Claude Lévi-Strauss. You know the floating signifier: a word like "thing" or "stuff" that could stand in for anything. "Political correctness" is an example: it could mean anything you don't like (so long as it comes from the left). I turned this concept around: the "floating signified." In France, whether you talk about Islamo-leftism, gender (in English), intersectionality, even deconstruction, or cancel culture, "*wokisme*", "*postcolonialisme*", "*décolonialisme*" (that's how they're called in the French polemic, to make them sound like mere ideologies), they're all part of the same field, the same rhetoric, the same polemic. In the end, we're not sure what all these words mean, but we know they more or less mean the same thing. What's the floating signified behind all these signifiers? Critical thinking is the common denominator. Again, we may not be sure of the meaning of critique today. But *they* do. This is the paradox of anti-intellectualism. The same people who dismiss intellectual work as unimportant and irrelevant apparently find it important to fight against intellectuals. What we're dealing with is the paradox of being recognized by those who despise us and just want to get rid of us.

Now, some people could be tempted to think that there's something good about anti-intellectualism. They might believe that it's anti-elitist, since intellectuals are supposed to be elitist. That's why I think it's important at this moment to try and clarify why today intellectual work is not elitist – on the contrary, in a democracy we want everyone to have access to knowledge and critical thinking. It's an element of citizenship. What I would call intellectualism is not just for the few, but the many. Intellectual work is not just about a category of people (intellectuals). Sure, there is a category of people who are paid to do intellectual work. It's a privilege to have more freedom for that – although, given the evolution of academic work, sometimes, we wonder... But what is important is that, potentially, intellectual work is everyone's prerogative.

It's a question of democracy. Again, we have the help of the people who hate us. In the same way that I have many times thanked Pope Benedict for advertising gender studies, basically making everyone aware of the existence of our field, I'd personally like to thank President Macron for attacking intellectuals who talk about race. In June

2020, he launched this campaign in *Le Monde*, denouncing academics who use the concept of intersectionality, for encouraging “the ethnicization of the social question”. He held us responsible for “splitting the Republic in two.” As the co-editor of the book *De la question sociale à la question raciale?* (D. Fassin and E. Fassin, 2006), I had to wonder who he might be talking about. Interestingly, this attack has encouraged people, starting with journalists, to learn more about this field. All of a sudden, intersectionality in France has become a household word. Who knew about the word intersectionality before 2020? A few people. Now magazines talk about it. Of course, not in ways that we might desire. But there’s no such thing as bad publicity.

Why was Macron attacking us at that time? June 2020 was the end of the first lockdown. Why attack intersectionality when it was clear that the pandemic is very much an intersectional phenomenon, in terms of epidemiology, but also if you consider the composition of professional care, not to mention the victims of police repression for not complying with sanitary rules such as wearing masks. So, why attack intersectionality then? Well, because the end of the lockdown coincided with powerful antiracist demonstrations organized by the *comité Adama Traoré* against police violence. What the President argued was that academic work on race is linked to these antiracist mobilizations. For him, these misguided youths have been perverted by academic knowledge. We often worry that critical thinking cannot be used directly by those who need it most. But apparently, according to the President, that’s not the case.

But there is more. Such attacks do not only come from outside academia. They also come from within universities – and not just from colleagues who are sympathetic to the President’s politics. For example, a few months later, a close colleague of mine for more than a decade, the historian of immigration Gérard Noiriel, wrote on his blog that Macron is wrong. The problem is not academics in general; it’s only some of them. He then gave one name only – mine. So, this harsh critic of the President encourages him to choose his targets with greater precision. This is not an isolated example. We’ve had all kinds of events organised in France by academics *against* critical academics.

I will not list them, for lack of time, as I want to clarify an important distinction between freedom of expression and academic freedom. Many have insisted on this distinction, people like Joan Scott, Robert Post, and others. Let me say briefly that students are entitled to free speech like everyone else. But there is something specific

about academic freedom that defines our profession. Free speech is the right to say anything you like within the restrictions of the law: in France, theoretically at least, sexist, homophobic, and racist speech is illegal. Academic freedom is the right to say everything – but not anything. In French, “*tout, mais pas n’importe quoi*.” Let me translate this into English: anything, or *n’importe quoi*, that’s what Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt, in a famous essay, called “bullshit.”

It’s a useful concept. He explains (and I think it is very important for us) that bullshitting is very different from lying. Lying means you believe in truth: you’re trying to make what you’re saying sound truthful, even though you know it’s not. Bullshit, on the contrary, says: I don’t care. I don’t care about the truth. It’s irrelevant. Trump or Bolsonaro will say anything; *n’importe quoi*. They’re not even trying to make plausible assertions. Why bother? Traditional media can always try to do some fact checking to combat fake news. But it takes hours to refute one sentence that only required seconds to utter. It’s even worse with bullshit, like “alternative facts”. How can you refute those? These serve as digressions; they have no information value; only entertainment value. It’s Gresham’s law applied to public discourse: bad currency drives out good currency. Bullshit drives out truth – rational discourse, arguments, facts.

How is academic freedom relevant? We’re free to say everything, but we have the obligation to avoid bullshit as much as possible. This obligation works, on the whole, because we have a vested interest in maintaining our professional legitimacy. Of course, we sometimes say anything – *n’importe quoi*. But that’s costly: our credibility goes down. And, of course, there’s no consensus on what constitutes bullshit. Some of our colleagues apparently think that gender studies and Critical Race Theory are no more than bullshit. But still: we depend on the judgment of our peers. Even students are not so much interested in our opinions (which they can find outside the classroom), but in our critical effort based on our knowledge and reflections.

Now, why is this distinction important? Attacks on intellectuals are also attacks on democracy, whether it be in neoliberal authoritarian regimes, or in neofascist regimes, or some mix of the two, whatever you want to call them. And there’s a whole range: from Turkey to France, from Hungary to Brazil, very different regimes. But still, there are common elements between them: the antidemocratic drift that starts with anti-intellectualism. Now, why is it important, in reaction, to claim if not truth, at least the



value of truth? Why fight to make things more truthful, or less untruthful? Why is that important? Well, because if anything goes, if truth holds no value, then of course, you have so-called populists, that is, real neofascists.

I'll conclude with the new Minister of Education, Pap Ndiaye, who has been a target for the far right. Not only because he is a Black man, but also because this historian has written the first French book about "the Black condition" after participating in the book I mentioned before: the edited volume on race we published in 2006. Noiriël, who I mentioned before, also participated in this collection. He recently posted a text against Ndiaye on his blog. Just like me, he is accused of inciting identity politics. I'm not sure that, as a White man, I'm in a good position to defend identity politics: white identity tends to be for white supremacists, not alleged Islamo-leftists... What strikes me is that Noiriël has to explain that his attacks have nothing to do with those of the far right. That says something. It contributes to the general atmosphere that my colleague Philippe Corcuff has called "*confusionnisme*." The differences between right and left risk becoming blurred. In 2007, I wrote about Nicolas Sarkozy (then a candidate for the presidency) and his "art of confusion." In the end, the truth gets lost.

Is it a good thing that my former colleague and friend Pap Ndiaye has been appointed in charge of National Education? It sure feels better than his predecessor Jean-Michel Blanquer. But still, I would like to raise a question. What is the regime of Macron founded on? The phrase *en même temps* – at the same time, one thing and the opposite. Having Blanquer and then Ndiaye is just one more example of *en même temps*. Even though one comes after the other, Macron's logic suggests that having a minister who accuses so-called Islamo-leftists of "intellectual complicity with terrorism," and another who is harassed for being allegedly "woke", is just politics: one thing and the contrary. Macron's own art of confusion has to do with bullshit: *n'importe quoi*, anything goes. In that sense, appointing Pap Ndiaye is not a good sign. This politics of confusion is not reassuring in the least.

**GT:** Thank you in particular for opening out tensions and debates about the relationship between freedom of speech and academic freedom, which I think we might have more to say on later. But I'll turn now to our final panellist, Diana Molinari. Great to see you Diana, even if at distance. Welcome to Paris and the floor is yours.

**Diana Mulinari (DM):** Thank you very much. And thanks for inviting me. This is an extremely important topic and I hope that, after the discussion, we can get to some kind of productive, collaborative agenda. I'm speaking from the context of Sweden and the research programme I'm responsible for is a study of anti-gender social movements and organisations in the Nordic countries, and we defined the Nordic countries in terms of Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. The first paradox we are exploring is, on the one side, the specificity of the "Nordic model" with, in Sweden, a focus on gender equality, human rights and multiculturalism alongside the success of neofascist political parties (more than 20% in the 2022 elections) with a clear-cut racist and antifeminist agenda.

It's beautiful to be here, so far away from you and to have so much in common. One of the things I want to raise regarding this research programme is about methodological and ethical issues. We are working with qualitative methods: traditional participant observation field work and ethnography and all the members of the research programme are very conscious of the methodological challenges in studying restrictionist movements; the sharing of the everyday with neofascist social actors and developing conversations with people that, as citizens, we dislike. Actually, I do not only dislike them, but I fear these people.

I would also like to share very shortly some of the preliminary results of this research; I do understand that everybody is very tired and wants to go for a beer. I will only speak for a few minutes. Number one, the normality of violence. One of the things that emerges very clearly in our exploratory study is that broadly defined critical scholars have experienced threats. One of the scholars we spoke to working in gender studies argues that "if you are in this field, you know that you're going to receive threats; that you're going to get all these terrible emails or whatever; that you may need police protection; or that you may have to leave your home". Another of the scholars working in critical race studies asserted: "well you know that when you're in gender studies, or in critical race studies, that happens".

We want to illuminate this normalisation of violence, where the level of everyday threats is very present and even naturalized. We have increasing evidence that people choose not to work in these areas because of the level of violence. We are speaking about death threats to scholars and their families. We have also in the research

programme focused on the role of the mainstream academy, particularly because what we see in the Nordic countries are forms of collaboration between mainstream academia and neofascism through systematic efforts to create clear boundaries between what they conceptualise as science and the field of the political. Activistic scholarship (this is how mainstream science labels feminist/queer/critical race studies) should not be financially supported by the state, it is argued.

We would like to argue that the mainstream academy, while not attacking gender or race critical studies, has a very clear project of “saving science” and defending the “core of the disciplines” from people like me. Among other things this is done through demonising gender studies and framing us as “controversial scholars discussing sensitive issues”. It is fundamental, they continue in the name of free speech, to allow them to voice their concerns towards what they consider a threat to science and truth seeking.

An important argument regarding the neofascist anti-gender social actors we have been studying is that they are not in the periphery; they are not marginal. These are people in important positions within the social sciences and humanities. They are in research councils. They are determining who gets money, why and where, and they are respected professors. The neo-fascist inspired social actors who have been articulating these kinds of attacks against gender studies, critical migration and ethnic studies are scholars within academia, with quite stable and powerful positions.

In the Nordic context, particularly in Sweden, the anti-gender social movements attack gender studies (and other traditions inspired by critical theory) through labelling them as “unscientific”, “ideological”, “activist” and “political”, are more specifically represented as being in denial of what these conservative political actors define as the “materiality of biological facts” (see Martinsson and Mulinari, 2023; and Mulinari and Neergaard, 2022). Many of our scholars respond to these attacks by defending the discipline of gender studies as being scientific enough. There is a serious risk in these defensive strategies that obscures reflection on how feminist scholars have conceptualised the relations between truth and power or what kind of context for truth we are interested in developing.

I want to conclude this short introduction by sharing some of the preliminary results of our research project, within the tradition of a scholarship of hope. Because, otherwise, the only thing we can do is to repeat that things are terrible. And we know that already; everybody knows that things are terrible. I must confess that I did not think that academic and political debates on gender fluidity would create such an impressive right-wing response. I was wrong. Bolsonaro in Brazil actually won his election arguing that feminists were destroying children and, through children, destroying the nation. So it seems that the knowledge we produce and/or the knowledge produced in articulation with social movements (this is not our knowledge, but the knowledge produced together and in humble relationship with social movements) is important. And what we've seen in the Swedish context is courageous decolonial/feminist queer articulated student mobilisations in a number of universities. These students, and the scholars who have supported them, have been the target of a serious level of repression that is shaped by an emotional regime of anger and fear. At the core of these reactions is a transformation of universities, with the presence of people like me or other "out of place" outsiders within academia with emerging subject positions that are creating spaces of resistance, resilience and hope.

The other perspective that I would strongly argue for is the need to learn from the South. I know that it sounds a little bit like a cliché. I was born and raised in Argentina. What I know is that scholars in Latin America embody a solid knowledge of the diverse ways of resisting fascism in terms of their ability to move within and outside academia. And I think that their ability to create other spaces outside of academia, when academia is threatened, and to get back to academia when it's possible to get back, is something we should really learn from the global south in a frame of scholarships of hope. Thank you for inviting me, and sorry that I'm not there.

**GT:** Thank you so much, Diane. We're sorry you're not here too. Maybe you can stay for the next little while, while we have a discussion. We will go straight to the audience involvement and discussion. So the floor is open.

**Q1:** Thank you. Thank you for the intriguing presentations. I was waiting for your presentation, Éric. But when you started to talk at the end, you started to talk about truth (that we shouldn't give up on it) and I got confused. How do we make the argument that this *is* the truth? Or that this is *not* the truth? How do we even do that?

If you look at the topics and the things that they are saying which you call neofascist (I totally agree on that one), they're not talking about non-truth, they are (self-construed) as very factual. And they do think that they are talking about truth. So how do we make our case that ours is the truth? Not theirs? It's a difficult one; I get confused when people talk about truth as a counter strategy.

**Q2:** Can I add to that if it's helpful? Thanks for all the presentations. Just to follow up a little bit. I thought it was really interesting when you were asking how can critique work when we know everything about objects of critique; as I understand it, the problem isn't a lack of knowledge, but rather that some people only like what they see. So, my question would be: we know that some people are more impermeable to truth than others, so does that mean that we should be looking at the question of who should be the objects of critique? Are some people worth critiquing more because they are more permeable to truth than others who frankly, don't give a shit? And by which I kind of mean of liberalism, by the way.

**Q3:** Yes, thank you. Really great presentations. Just a very short question. A number of you referred to the things you're describing not as critiques but as attacks? Surely you don't respond to an attack with a critique, you respond with a counter attack? Shouldn't we?

**GT:** Let's take one more specific question for Éric and go back to the panel then.

**Q4:** Yes. I guess I have two questions for Éric. The first one is: can you just elaborate on the protests in France organised by academics against other academics? Maybe if you could just elaborate on that. I was curious. And then my second comment is: maybe I want to extend a line of thinking from our last panel, which was also about academics under attack. The moderator I thought brought up a great question when he asked about the assumptions of all these presentations. Are they harkening back to some golden past of the university, that was so much better, that doesn't exist? And by the same token, maybe I just want to play the devil's advocate and say about both the last panel and the this one that a lot of these presentations offer what you could call a sort of a self-congratulatory self-theorisation of the academy that we are enlightened, and aligned with intersectionality and BLM and woke-ism. And these bad people are attacking us. And I'm curious if anyone's ever heard of Jack Halberstam?

She's a queer FTM (Female to Male) transgender academic in Duke and she criticises woke cultures. She was part of LGBT culture. And she says woke-ism is just another facet of neoliberalism about these spoiled-brat millennials who never want to have any discomfort, and who don't know what it's like to suffer and all this stuff. And so, I guess, and I suppose this question also builds on what the gentleman here said about truth, it seems that everybody is assuming we know the truth, and those people out there they're against BLM and woke. I think sometimes that this binarism is correct. And sometimes I support this binarism. But I just want to throw it out there that that is the binarism that's operating under all these talks.

**GT:** Okay, I think we'll start with that; we have specific questions. So, we have a contention that the binaries that we're reproducing when we look at the academy under attack are verging on the self-congratulatory. Thoughts?

**EF:** That's a good thing, right?

**GT:** It can be!

**EF:** I'm not saying it's an ideal in life, of course, but in this context... I mean, intellectual arrogance is not a good thing. Sure. But today, is that the main peril? I don't think so. We definitely have to stand for what we believe, right? And the first thing is that we have to believe in intellectual work. It's not arrogance. We're confronted with anti-intellectualism. Do we want people to think more or less? If you're, let's say, Bolsonaro, or if you're Trump, or any of these figures, you don't want people to be intelligent. It's not just authoritarian regimes: neoliberal regimes don't want people to think for themselves. That's the battle about the media, for example, the control of the media. But if you believe in democracy, you want people to be intelligent, that is, you want people who can think for themselves. You want people to engage in critical thinking. In higher education, we're defending a value that I think is a democratic value.

May I talk about truth now?

**GT:** We're not leaving here until we've sorted out the question of truth! Let's add another dimension though. I think that the panel had different ideas as to how we conceive of this as an attack. Many of these attacks are deeply personal and deeply

threatening. But we had a strategic question raised, which is when we conceive of these as political attacks (which is what they are), what is the response? Or what's the relationship between critique and some form of counterattack? Does one respond with critique or with a counterattack?

**SU:** One should understand that the very bickering on social media is the mediatic condition for right-wing regimes today. They do not really look for absolute consensus. I have been researching nationalist projects in India and Brazil. In India, for instance, we see “enterprise Hindutva” [Hindu nationalism] which is argumentative, experientially voluntary and capable of working with contradictions. For a long time, mediated discourses were thought to be about creating a form of consent. But with social media discourses, there is an active production of confrontations and arguments. This is shaped by the industrial-scale production of the interactivity of digital capitalism, which political regimes around the world are actively putting to work in ways that can benefit them. This means you contribute to the ideological hegemony by engaging in confrontations, while summaries of hegemonic thought keep getting repeated across conversation threads.

Our response needs to be much more tactful. Responding to attacks with counterattacks could feed the logic of bickering as the mediatic condition for right-wing politics. How then should we intervene? This is a very difficult question. I've tried to engage in critique and take this critique to AI and machine learning. The key question is: how to build categories and processes that are context-rich and historically sensitive so that machines can detect problematic content more effectively? How do we develop collaborations with computer scientists in ways that this critical language gets to the machine learning field as well? This is one form of intervention which tries to address the problem not through counterattacks but via more contextualized detection and mitigation mechanisms. Needless to say, message-level intervention is important but not sufficient; we need a much broader approach including platform governance and community centred collaborations.

**GT:** Let's return to the question about truth. I think it is interesting to bring something that Diana said to complement the question. Éric has discussed a commitment to truth as a way of thinking about how academic freedom involves not just freedom, but a set of responsibilities. Diana, you have described the pressure to conform to the idea that

we're "really scientific". In other words, not to struggle for the kind of critical ground which has escaped from, or has been formed by, opposing certain kinds of positivist logics, or whatever it might be. So these things are not quite the same. But there's a relation between them, I think, that we could also examine?

**EF:** I'm very pleased that the word that causes trouble is "truth." It's reassuring, truly reassuring. Let me start with a claim: anything I say in life is contextual. That is, I don't pretend to speak absolute truths. What I said today has to do with the context in which we operate: fake news on the one hand, alternative facts on the other. What do we do when some people authorize not only fake news but also alternative facts? Some have asked: haven't postmodern theories contributed to diluting truth? That's not my point. But in today's context, I'm quite interested, for example, in Pierre Bourdieu's last book, his last course at the Collège de France: *Science de la science et réflexivité* (2001). Bourdieu tries to take seriously the historical nature of truth, which is still truth. We don't need to think of truth in theological terms. Basically, here's the difference. Are we talking about absolute truth? In that case, that's theology. Or are we talking about historical truth? That's what we do in the social sciences. For the moment, that's the best we have, or that's one of the best options we have for describing the world.

So, what I think we have to do in democratic societies is to claim, or rather reclaim, truth, not as an absolute, but as the best we can do. Which means it's defined not in comparison to theological truths, but in opposition to "bullshit." Fighting against the bullshit of alternative facts, in my opinion, is essential. So, it's not falling for some kind of ideal truth. It's saying that truth takes work. Saying something that is more accurate than what I said five minutes ago will take me work. For example, take my presentation, what I just said about truth: when I work on it more, maybe I'll come up with something that makes more sense. What it means is at least that I'm hoping to make more sense. So, the point is not whether what I said about truth is true. It's just that I'm hoping to avoid saying *n'importe quoi* – bullshit. I'm working on it. And hopefully, I will keep working on it.

**DM:** We are very trained in challenging definitions of truth coded through discourses of European universalism and power. However, coming as I do from feminist traditions of standpoint theory and expanded objectivity, I would like to argue that while it could be said that our truths, or what I would prefer to call our knowledge



claims, are contextual, this knowledge will protect and even save the lives of trans<sup>2</sup> kids.

Social movements working for social justice in its broader sense have a clear understanding, of, if not the Truth, the kind of world they want to create. So I go for contextual truths, contextual forms of knowledges. I vote for that.

**SU:** Let me be a bit more provocative. I don't think truth is a central problem, especially when we look at how digital mediations operate today and how they are helping right-wing regimes. Truth is not a relevant issue when we shift the focus to actors and their media practices. I say this because when we turn to the distribution logics of extreme content, we realize how this kind of content is circulating. I'm not talking about academics; I'm talking about online users who participate in right-wing discourses. I've been thinking about how community allegiances are centred in distribution logics within right-wing milieus. To give a concrete example, political parties are today implanting extreme content within family and neighbourhood WhatsApp groups. Such distribution tactics place extreme content at the confluence of affect and obligation.

Affect is evident when people derive pleasure from sharing this content. And obligation is pronounced when people feel they have the need to forward this message because it has come from their uncle, for instance. Hence, inaction on received content conflicts with obligatory ties of thick social relations. This particular confluence between obligation and affect makes this problem not one of truth but of social distribution and exchange. In other words, when messages are embedded within personalized, trust-based networks, what ensues is not so much a problem of truth (whether it is true or false) or the problem of morality (whether it is good or bad) but an emotional or obligatory urge to share them and be in (if not with) the flow.

Therefore, I think, this whole obsession with "truth" has to be rethought because of the innovative, creative ways in which extreme content is circulating today. I would therefore say: please de-centre this question of truth. Let us look at how content gets absorbed and distributed in actual digital environments. We should use this insight in our battles against political attacks on progressive academia by showing how they might not be operating on grounds of truth or untruth, but within fun and obligatory

environments of collective aggression which are also tapped for corporate gains and political profits.

**GT:** Thank you. Yes, content has a use value and an exchange value, I think. I think we could take one last round of very brief questions or statements, and then come back to the panel.

**Q5:** Okay, I'll be very brief; this might be an impossible question to answer. But what comes after critique? So we've talked a lot about critique. We've talked about the limits of critique. We've talked about maybe we need to move beyond critique or to a different critique. What comes after critique, do we need that?

**Q6:** Sorry, what I want to say is a little intuitive, and a bit churlish, so it will take me about two hours, but I'll try and be economical about this. But I was wondering whether you would agree that when we talk about fake news there's a sense of enjoyment about it and your last remarks suggested some of that because there's a pleasure to it. There's a sense of excitement. It's fake news, alternative facts that may be part of some sort of pornography of aggression. And this is why it's appealing. We don't care about whether it's true or not, because probably the primary motive is one of excitement, one of pleasure, and the pleasure of aggression. And when we've been referring to fascism (and neofascism), not as a sheer term of abuse, not as a sheer insult, but as something we need to reactivate as an analytical concept, I suppose this is part of this broader picture in which verbal aggression, aggression about truth in the various, contested ways in which we can define it, also results as far as the far-right is concerned, or the ultra-right, in people being actually killed in mass killings, whether in Northern Europe... in Christchurch or elsewhere. As far as we're concerned, we haven't started killing anybody en masse, whether they be homosexuals, or whether they be Black people or Jewish people or Muslim people anyway.

**Unknown:** Or heterosexual.

**Q6:** Or heterosexual. So I was just trying to bring this in because it's been more or less implicit in what you were saying and I was wondering how far you would accept and go along this line. And just as a context for this (and this is the really churlish point; I'm sorry about this): we are in a moment of such extreme inequality, such

unprecedented brutal inequality, that the only way of keeping this going are extreme levels of violence. The only way, if the environment and system in which we are in now is not being questioned radically, the only way of keeping it going, is by raising the levels of violence to keep the whole show running. And this is, I suppose, the forms of aggression you've been referring to: verbal aggression, and aggression against truth, or a certain idea of truth or negotiable truth, and the idea that truth can be negotiated. And when there's no negotiation going on, in the situations we've been referring to, this is part of this wider moment of violence, without which the whole environment in which we are in stops working basically. Sorry, I hope that makes some sort of sense. But maybe you can work into that.

**GT:** It's not churlish at all, it's terrifying. So we have: what comes after critique, how do we deal with the question of drive and, in many ways, with violence and the circulation of violence? You wanted also to come in briefly?

**Q7:** Just a word, really. I mean, I want to thank everyone for an amazing day, really. And keeping the flame alive as Natalie [Fenton] said earlier, but what we're describing is a state of war. I mean war here, and war waged on, for example, the academic institution of people interacting with knowledge or critique at least on two levels. War by ideologues on those who defend minorities. And corporate war to destroy the institution itself in what we know it was or thought it was. So it's not a question, it's what do we do in a state of war? Bullshit that Éric described very well is one major weapon of our enemies. What do we do, you know, one position removed, suppressed after another, speaking together, feeling some sort of common complicity. But what else do we do?

**GT:** Well, we're definitely not going to end this conference on some artificial moment of uplift, really are we? So, in a way, these three questions dovetail very nicely together: what comes after critique? What do we do with the various ways in which this violence is animated? And how to understand what's at stake in what, as you describe, is I think realistically a war? We have three dimensions; we have three panellists. I invite you to take the one you like best. And, Diana, perhaps you would like to start?

**DM:** Well, I love the question what comes after critique, and I love thinking about what comes after what critique is realistically meant to be. And I think that is something

we should be working on. And that's why they hate us, because we have sometimes (not always, but sometimes) the ability to contribute to the creation of realistic utopias and the idea that other worlds are possible.

On the question of violence, I was thinking, of course, about Fanon and his reading of violence, and the relationship between masculinity and violence. I do agree that there's increasing inequalities, and I'm speaking from Sweden, where class inequalities have increased, impressively, in the last 20 years.

The militarisation of the sort that we've seen in Sweden, in relation to the war in Ukraine...I was thinking about feminist agendas in relation to this. I think that there's no necessary relationship between inequalities and violence: inequalities can be politicised and go in other ways. In that sense, I think: I'm very convinced that one of the only tools towards decreasing violence is the feminist movement and the feminist queer movements. And I hope, before I say goodbye, that you can visit me in Sweden. It's very nice in the spring now, or I can meet you somewhere else in Europe. I really hope that we can continue this discussion. You are very welcome to Sweden and to learn more about where I live.

**GT:** When's the plane leaving?

**SU:** We are coming there for the beer. Thank you so much, Diane, that was so helpful. So, what comes after critique? Critique and courage should go hand in hand because what is required of us is courage, and also persistence, and we have to continue to teach these courses and research these topics. As academics, I think, one of our main responsibilities is to take up difficult questions and develop optimism about the role of ideas in improving the worlds we inhabit. And I always wonder, should I be just looking at these dark topics, one after the other: after studying extreme speech, I've taken up online misogyny as a topic, so I just can't stop it. Perhaps we just need to be persistent. That's one way of responding to the question. But another way is to potentially repurpose neoliberal tropes that circulate inside the university space. I sometimes try to bring critical ideas to those tropes, for instance, diversity. We know diversity is now getting instrumentalized for neoliberal ends and is linked to innovation, etc. But whenever there is a diversity event, they tend to invite me and then I go and bring in all these points. So, it's just a way of utilising the opportunities

and avenues we have within the university space, but then continuing to research and teach difficult topics, and speak about this research at schools, museums, the UN and so on. If we stop speaking, we are going to lose a lot.

**EF:** Well, indeed, it's a state of war. There's no doubt about this. The question is: what can we do? I think the first thing we will try to do is our job, which, of course, does not suffice. But it's the first thing we can hope to do, and trying to make sense of what's going on in ways that are not totally absurd is, I think, useful. Again, the anti-intellectualism that we hear today confirms, in my view, the importance of taking intellectual work seriously. And fighting anti-intellectualism, not just in society, or not just among neofascists, but also among our own colleagues.

That's the first thing. Then, of course, it can mean fighting... I mean, we see people in Ukraine that are literally fighting, and some of them are academics. Of course, we're not in the same situation. I'm not in that situation. And, so, for the moment, I try to work with what I have, which also means working not just inside academia, but also working with social movements. I recently heard and talked with an Argentinian feminist, who's an academic, Verónica Gago. She's been very active in the *Ni Una Menos* movement (a version of #MeToo). It's very interesting when you see that in Latin America, feminist academics have an influence on feminism in the streets. Think of the name of a Chilean group of feminist women, *Las Tesis*: "the theses" is a reference to Rita Segato's work as an anthropologist. So, I think we should not underestimate the importance of what we do. It's not the old style, intellectuals thinking that they're going to tell people how to do things, or how to think. But, you know, we're doing things in our work, and people can use them. That's why some of still us have jobs that are paid by the state, even if, unfortunately, fewer and fewer people in academia have them.

The last thing I want to say is about the politics of making things desirable. And clearly, fascists know how to produce desire, even if it's based on resentment. So, it's our job to think about what is desirable from a democratic perspective. What is desirable about trying to be intelligent, rather than stupid? It's not that there are different categories of people, of course, but it's a different politics of knowledge and of intelligence. So, I think we need to encourage this desire. My experience is that people actually take pleasure in understanding things. That's the impression that I have with students.

That's the impression that I have when I speak publicly. The same applies to me. My experience is that when I understand something, I feel great - for at least two seconds! All this is basically saying there's pleasure in feeling less stupid. So, we should bet on that. I don't have anything better to offer, given the job that I do.

**GT:** Thank you. I think with that, we can thank our three wonderful panellists for their input.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chavalarias D (2021) “Islamogauchisme”: la piège de l’alt-right se referme sur la Macronie’. Available at: <https://iscpif.fr/chavalarias/?p=2067>

<sup>2</sup> Originally used to include explicitly both transsexual and transgender, or (now usually) to indicate the inclusion of gender identities such as gender-fluid, agender, etc., alongside transsexual and transgender.

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