



# ACADEMIA AND POLITICS – ENTANGLED, YET NOT THE SAME

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The COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the increasingly prominent LGBTIQ\* movements as well as growing political incentives for professionalized academic outreach have intensified debates on relations between academia and the public—raising, in turn, (once more) the question of the relation between academia and politics. These debates take place in very different contexts and, thus, political constellations and are perhaps more explosive in the United States at present than in the German context from which we argue here, although they are fiercely contested there as well. But as important and revealing as it is to shed light on the respective discourse constellations and sometimes severe consequences—think, for example, of the banning of certain socio-critical study material—we will focus on one aspect in the following paper. The point of departure is the accusation, appearing in many of these debates and contexts, that gender studies is an example of an (excessively/inappropriately/dangerously) politicized scientific discipline.

This argument is raised partly by actors seeking to vilify gender studies and the politics of equity (e.g., [Hark and Villa 2015](#); [Kuhar and Paternotte 2018](#); [Graff, Kapur and Walters 2019](#)) and partly from within academia (notably [Hirschauer 2003](#)). The later approach criticizes gender studies for conceiving of itself too emphatically as political *praxis* and ignoring the difference between politics and scholarship. We think it worthwhile to revisit this question—not least in order to discuss the ambivalences that likewise are as old as the field itself. Instead of erasing ambiguity, which would be both epistemologically and empirically untenable, we argue in favor of a reflexive approach to ambivalences as complex relations of mediation. We also argue in favor of keeping these conflicts genealogically visible rather than perpetuating simple narratives of progress or decline. This also helps avoid the crude either/or rhetoric currently dominating public discourse. While we uphold a distinction between political and academic practice—with regard to both generating knowledge and communicating knowledge—we argue in favor of a complex, if not dialectical view of both areas of knowledge production and their relatedness. This view seeks to avoid naively scientific attitudes that ignore the situatedness of knowledge and science as well as its ethical and political responsibility and thereby lapse into ideology.

No less problematic, on the other hand, is the conflation of politics and scholarship, however progressive or well-intended these may be. We see this, for instance, when instructors or students fail to distinguish between a university seminar and an activist training session, with reading lists guided solely by political preference, or when research unhesitatingly adopts questions and categories from an activist agenda. A differentiated perspective would also have to consider the mutual entanglement of both logics and modes, political and academic. For research is always and inevitably itself a form of practice, one that is politically significant,

historically conditioned, and enacted in settings of institutional power. If, therefore, any boundary is to be drawn, the meaning of *academic* on the one hand and *political* on the other requires illumination.

### Ideal and Illusion of Scientific Freedom

In modernity, science is associated with the (never-uncontested) claim to do nothing but generate knowledge—not knowledge *for* extraneous purposes but knowledge *in and of itself* ([Luhmann 1970](#); [Schimank 2012](#); [Stichweh 1988](#)). This ideal type of its form and function is most closely realized in what we call *basic research*: a kind of methodically controlled reflection, critique, observation, interrogation, reconstruction, discovery, and analysis of all aspects of the world—and one that can consider itself free from practical considerations and necessities save for those relating to the practice of research itself. That science, understood thus, should be fully “free” from any other concern is actually a regulative ideal or “real fiction”: a powerful and effective idea, a norm that guides practice and is legally enshrined. Another such real fiction is the idea of a purely meritocratic recruitment process—an *ideal* that is necessary and effective, albeit unattainable given social conditions as they are ([McNamee and Miller 2004](#)). The notion that science really—empirically and factually—*did* operate in such a manner is what we would call “scientism,” meaning a doxical attitude towards science ([Bourdieu 1972](#)), a faith cloaking itself in the mantle of self-evident knowledge, an ideology as understood by Marx and Mannheim ([Marx 2016/1845-46](#); [Mannheim 2005/1929](#)).

Particularly in their feminist variants, women’s and gender studies have contributed much to critical reflection on these fictions, including that of the scientist’s supposedly general, universal, and objective position as having no bearing on the research process ([Crasnow 2020](#) for a broad overview; [Schiebinger 1991](#) for one specific case study). Gender studies has emphasized, and its research has shown, that this position is in fact highly specific and reflective of a particular perspective. Science is practiced by people who are socially situated ([Harding 2004](#); [Intemann 2010](#)), resulting in (more or less) systematic imbalances, biases, and blind spots in research. Empirical analyses of the conditions under which scientific knowledge is produced have shown that the position of the ideal-typical scientist—in its historical concretion, a male, white, middle-class, heterosexual with no physical (or social) disabilities—is free from practical considerations and necessities only because certain tasks (care, family, physical labor, etc.) are taken over by others. Research also draws on experiences of absence, reflected for instance in the social sciences’ understanding of “work,” which often was and continues to be reduced to paid employment in the marketplace generating surplus value, rendering—gendered—care work invisible ([Tancred 1995](#)).

### Power and Positionality

The second argument, formulated in gender studies and other research contexts as well as by such canonical authors as Marx ([1971/1859](#)), Horkheimer ([1988/37](#)), and Bourdieu ([2000](#)), is a critique of the idea of an (as it were) “pure” knowledge production, of science as pursuing “neutral” and “objective” research unfettered by normative or political interests. By contrast, empirical studies and theoretical analyses have shown science to be enmeshed in power games and structures, which have a complex part in shaping and conditioning (but not crudely determining) the content of scholarship, resources, and their distribution, cultures, organizations, and practices. The productive conclusion is that science must confront its own enmeshing by means of methodically controlled (self-) reflexivity. This is at the core, for instance, of Haraway’s or Harding’s understanding of a better or “strong(er) objectivity” ([Haraway 1988](#); [Harding 2005](#)). Gender studies repeatedly challenges this (self-) reflexivity and develops it through debates, for instance by critically interrogating and expanding concepts and methods, and by demanding greater complexity within the category of “gender,” from the perspective of queer, trans,\* and Black studies, from intersectional, decolonial, and/or critical race perspectives (see e.g., [Hill-Collins 1994](#); [Hark 2005](#); [Lutz et al. 2011](#); [Essed et al. 2017](#); [Tudor 2021](#)). However, this claim and this programmatic

(self-) reflexivity—alongside the necessity of declaring one’s own interests and motivations—are hallmarks of the entire critical tradition in theory, not only of the constellations cited here. Yet none of this means that it surrenders its claim to be science and as such to contribute to human knowledge and indeed to “finding the truth”—on the contrary.

Reflecting on what Mannheim called the *Seinsgebundenheit* of knowledge ([Mannheim 2005/1929](#))—the connection between thought and the conditions of its existence—naturally includes an understanding of political processes in academia, with all its conflicts over working conditions and relations, resources, structures of exploitation, hierarchies, dependencies, and exclusionary mechanisms. The very question of who may legitimately claim the subject position here, who merits recognition as a scientist, is crucial and remains so to this day to the extent that “modernity” remains structured along racial, gendered, and (post- or neo-) colonial lines. “Others” are made to feel as outsiders every day, marked as The Woman, The Gay Person, The Black Person, etc.—and outsiders are presumed to be less capable of embodying knowledge, the discipline, science, *generality*. A female professor tends to be addressed as a woman—a male one as a professor. Books written by female authors tend to be filed under “women’s literature,” those by men simply as “literature” ([Showalter 1999](#))—unless these men are non-white or non-heterosexual, in which case they too may be filed under a specific and particularizing label and have doubt cast on their ability to stand for the general.

This ideological generalization of a specific position on the one hand and the marking of other positions as specific on the other hand is part of the cultural and normative texture of modernity, one that is constitutive of modernity’s normative and cultural fabric. Obviously, this also plays out at the concrete level of positions and resources. Of course, questions of power and also of exclusion are inherent in the field. Academia is not the province of grassroots democracy, nor ought it to be: not everybody is “able” to participate or even cares to. What is decisive, however, is what power and hierarchy in the scientific field are built on, how inclusion and exclusion are legitimized. Yet debates over the very structure of the field—who receives a degree and fills what position (and who does not), and indeed the very definition of “merit,” of quality and excellence—are not “merely” political, but go to the very heart of science. The same is true of debates over curricula, the scientific canon, the remit of professorships—debates, in brief, over matters of content. Here too gender studies has significant knowledge to contribute, the field itself having arisen from the women’s movement and hence only as a result of political struggles ([Brand and Sabisch 2018](#); [Metz-Göckel 1987](#)). In all these respects science must be understood as a political arena—or, to put it another way, its institutionalization and the (re-)structuring of its internal mechanisms must be understood as an ongoing process of political contestation.

### Scientific Knowledge and Politics – Different Logics . . .

Yet—and here we come to the core of our argument— fields, science and politics follow different logics and are regulated by different ideals (e.g., [Weber 1922/1904](#); [Rademacher and Wernet 2015](#)). Following Luhmann, for instance, politics might be defined as a social logic geared towards reaching collectively binding decisions with and for others ([Luhmann 2002](#)). Science, on the other hand, Luhmann finds to be concerned with “truth” (undoubtedly a complicated concept) and the exclusion of “untruth” ([Luhmann 1970](#) and [2018](#)). This requires the existence of a set of procedures for challenging truth claims and for (self-) reflection. Science, in another definition, obeys a logic of *differentiation*. In politics, by contrast, (too much) differentiation and self-reflection can have a paralyzing effect: politics seeks to arrive at decisions and thus tends to overlook differences in pursuit of common ground, just as its focus on power leads it to form alliances. Though science and politics (e.g., in the form of social movements) may refer to one another—the climate movement being an obvious example—they remain separate. Though feminist movements and feminist research and theory may share the same goal—e.g., “to overcome gendered domination and inequality” ([Becker-Schmidt and Knapp 2000](#))—they differ in their immediate practical concerns. Political movements must aim to be in a position to act, to create solidarity

around shared concerns, to forge alliances across different situations, to create opportunities for intervention and involvement in the political sphere.

Science, by contrast, is concerned first and foremost with analysis and gaining knowledge, with arriving at truths or insights that may be politically unwelcome or unsettling, particularly when it comes to understanding how “the world”—society, power, or inequality—works in the first place. This may in turn lead to new insights that *may* be politically relevant. Understanding the mechanisms of social reproduction is a tool that makes it possible to change them through political *praxis*. Yet this invariably raises questions of translation. Science, in raising questions of complexity, contingency, and context, should not be under any illusion that it can intervene directly in politics. Scientific and political speech belong to different genres, their respective terms and concepts operate in different modes and sometimes in a dialectic relatedness. Judith Butler made a similar point in an interview stating that “feminism needs women, but it need not know who they are” (Butler 1993). This headline points to the way two logics—that of politics and that of research, of knowledge—relate to one another in tension and mutual recognition. Politically relevant categories, though they may be politically necessary, should not be thought of as able to bear the full empirical and conceptual truth of the matter—nor, by the same token, does questioning these categories spell the end of politics.

### . . . yet Entangled

Two aspects, however, strike us as important in our reflection on the relation between academia and politics. First, though we maintain the distinction between these logics, we are no less aware of their entanglement, particularly in a field of critical studies whose knowledge interest is normative and even political (acknowledging that all research and researchers are somehow socially and politically situated). Critical science and theory take their bearings from people’s suffering ([Adorno 1966](#): 27), from empirical problems, from political conflicts. And their thriving to emancipation, justice, equality, human rights, peace, or the end of violence no doubt affects not only research questions but also methodological, conceptual, and theoretical choices. But if it is to remain “good” research, these dimensions must be and remain open and free from considerations of the all-too-immediate political utility ([Flick and Hoppe 2021](#)). Of course, this applies equally to the result, which ought not only or even chiefly to follow activist categories and hence be more or less known in advance. Once subsumed to politics, research undermines itself. Research processes should not give up their primary claim, that of producing knowledge. Critical reflection (on methods and categories) is compatible with a normative and even political knowledge interest, and it requires an acknowledgement of both the difference and the entanglement between politics and science rather than their conflation. For the research process, this also means not narrowing one’s own field of vision to coincide with a particular political perspective—for instance, not to disguise considerations of political utility as matters of knowledge. From a scientific perspective, the key question is not “What is to be done?” but rather “How does the object of our political interest work?”. Such analyses may then contribute to answering how, for instance, gendered injustice, lack of recognition, exclusion, exploitation, disenfranchisement, and power might be overcome. And Critical Theory and science understand that the possibility of change only lies in political action ([Marx 2011/1886](#)).

And, of course, scientists contribute to politics in one form or another, as they always have done and will continue to do, whether as activists in social movements and/or as engaged intellectuals intervening in public debates on the basis of their research: as epidemiologists on public health, as meteorologists on climate change, as physicians on reproductive rights, as sociologists on feminism, as psychiatrists on transgender\* rights, as historians on peace, etc. However, they—i.e., we—should be aware that this means thinking in a different, a political mode and hence speaking and writing in different genres, producing essays and manifestos, for instance. Ideally, this also includes permanent reflection on one’s own position of power, deriving from the social position of science, free from practical obligations—the magic mediating word here is *expertise*. Many

critical scientists alternate between these modes while eliding the difference. And for some, their conflation comes not from a lack of reflection, but due to the manner in which social positioning within academia is conditioned by power—e.g., as female, as racialized, as “disabled,” and/or as queer researchers affected by devaluation and particularization. When these researchers speak *scientifically*, they are almost always understood *politically*. And in a certain way their scientific speech *is* a political act, because their scientific analyses are considered incomplete, subjective, lacking “impartiality,” or otherwise questionable. These intersectional positionings cannot be played off against one another, and to disregard them is itself a political act, one born of privilege. To raise this issue in the current climate is to incur the charge of “identity politics” and thereby risk being caricatured and having one’s scientific and professional standing called into question. It is worth noting that this matter is currently the subject of intense discussion, not least in the German-speaking world—particularly in digital media, where journalism, academia, politics, civil society, and those directly concerned connect, talk, and debate the form and (non-)sense of “researchers as public intellectuals or politicians.” Ciphers such as “cancel culture” ([Daub 2022](#)), “identity politics” ([Walters 2018](#)), or “wokeism” are part of these debates. We suspect that these debates are a symptom of the ever-precarious and hence virulent question concerning the boundaries between the functional systems of modern societies and their inevitable mutual referentiality.

### Political and Academic Standpoints

Second, this emphasis on the different modes of knowledge production in politics and activism on the one hand and science on the other should not be taken to mean social movements and political practice were incapable of producing statements with a claim to truth. On the contrary, social movements have produced so many insightful texts and a great deal of activist research has proved highly illuminating (among many others, [Combahee River Collective 1977](#); [Precarias a la deriva 2011](#); [Cavallero and Gago 2021](#); [Gago 2020](#)). With regard to gender studies in particular, there can be no doubt that it owes many key insights and productive stimuli, even its roots, to feminist, queer, and other social movements. An emphasis on the complexity of female lives and life-worlds, a critique of a position of supposedly homogenous female subjectivity (e.g., [Davis 1972](#); [Flax 2004](#); [Butler 2006](#); etc.), critiques of identity ([Hark 2005](#); [Hieber and Villa 2007](#)), and intersectional thought ([Crenshaw 1989](#); [Lutz 2015](#)) emerged from largely political dynamics ([Shapiro 1996](#); [McDuffie 2011](#)). Thus, in gender studies, academic and movement-political forces are interwoven in the process of theory formation to a degree that makes a separation between science and politics seem hopeless at first sight—all the more so, many would argue, because challenging epistemological considerations are involved, for instance the question of “epistemic privileges” ([McAfee 2018](#)). Different theorists have argued that those who have the most to say about discriminating mechanisms are those most affected by them, bearing in mind that, according to black, feminist, and black feminist standpoint theories from [W.E.B. Du Bois](#) (2007) and [Harding \(1987\)](#) to [Hill-Collins \(1986, 1989\)](#), the subordinates arrive at knowledge not automatically, but by (collective) political practice and reflection. Those who experience power in their own bodies have a very precise and indeed bodily understanding of social structures that is never fully accessible to those who do not share these experiences. There is much to be said for this argument, but it should not be misunderstood as favoring an epistemology based purely on personal experience or partisanship. Instead, what it argues for is the necessity of taking seriously all experiences and translating them into knowledge interest.

On the other hand, there is the no-less-plausible argument that scientists’ epistemically privileged position is the result of its being endowed free from practical considerations and necessities and gifted with resources in the form of time, (acquired) knowledge, methods, and experience in reflection on “the world.” At the same time, this position potentially entails blindness to many forms of suffering and to the lack of these very resources. Privilege can block the relational insight into the dependence of one’s own epistemic position on the exploitation of others and on systemic injustices. The fact that science is (to a degree) free from practical considerations and necessities is both its resource and its Achilles’ heel. Those whose daily life is not free from

such practical considerations, who have to deal very concretely with the burden of an exploitative, unjust, and violent world, therefore sometimes know more and in any case something different about the world we all share and understand only in pre-structured segments. These segments also condition research, both enabling and constraining it.

### **The Core of Reflexivity**

What this means, in our opinion, is that neither the position of the “subaltern,” or “dominated,” nor that of the “scientist” signifies privileged access to the world. What counts is a dynamic, questioning, knowledge-seeking reflexive attitude and approach—towards that which one seeks to understand, towards others who may be affected by the world in different ways, but also towards oneself and one’s own social position. This is where “positional fundamentalism” ([Villa 2017](#) and [2020](#)) falls short, meaning a short-circuiting of positioning and standpoint, the equation of social position with an epistemological or substantial stance. We encounter this both in activist and in academic contexts. It is wrong, for instance, to claim that educationally privileged, heterosexual, white women per se had nothing to say about the realities of life as a proletarian Black lesbian. Yet it requires a highly reflexive and (self-) critical approach and a profound attempt at understanding the people whose lives are being discussed. This must include recognition and listening carefully and empathetically in an attitude of knowledge-oriented openness.

We are convinced that such a reflexive attitude can generate understanding in the sense of objective, situated knowledge ([Haraway 1988](#)) not only in the field of science but also within political movements. The possibility of an insight into prevailing circumstances emerges from collective processes and from jointly created structures of exchange and reflection. It requires work, it is often riven with tension and conflict, and it is always provisional. What, then, lies at the root of our insistence on the difference between politics and science? The peculiarity of scientific knowledge production resides in the institutionalization of intersubjective knowledge production. The historical genesis of the scientific field entailed the creation of places and the provision of resources along with the development and constant refinement of techniques by which knowledge can be generated in a methodically controlled fashion. For quantitative as well as for non-standardized, qualitative approaches, this also entails an undertaking to identify and remedy blind spots in interpreting data. Expert audiences represent an intersubjective controlling instance, demanding that research processes be disclosed and contribute to debate within the field and beyond. Processes such as peer review are intended to secure academic and methodical quality, though of course they have limits and produce certain exclusionary and norming effects. Institutionalized processes are by no means free of power, interests, and political overtones. Yet this does not mean that we are willing to abandon the scientific standpoint in favor of a subjectivist or relativist stance equating scientific practice with political content. On the contrary: we must be able to expect science to recognize seriously its socially constituted standpoint, to factor it in, and at the same time to transcend it—and to hold it to this standard.

### **In Defense of Science—and Politics**

Defending the mode of science means defending a space for society’s open reflection on itself. This implies that self-knowledge is one of science’s crucial tasks. In the current social climate and against the backdrop of debates in which science is exposed to fierce attacks—in the form e.g., of climate denialism, threats to vaccinating physicians, censorship of gender, and critical race research—defending science also means making a stand against “alternative facts” (without falling into a positivist stance) as well as positioning oneself in the struggle for resources. And: we need these resources, for critical research in particular must be free from practical considerations in the sense outlined above. For academic practice, however, defending the scientific standpoint also entails a commitment to openness of outcome. Research that is commissioned, regardless of

the actors and political interests involved, is highly problematic—as is the stipulation that research must be “communicated” as a condition for funding. We must avoid falling for a view that measures science by its ability to generate widely understood policies of supposedly common utility. Such criteria are populist fantasies, though their motivations may be understandable. What we are defending here is science as a place in which society is able to observe itself in all its aspects, including its relations to “nature.”

What is also at stake here—and this idea may make many critical researchers uncomfortable—is the defense of an epistemic standpoint which, in empirical research practice, is founded not least in an asymmetry between researchers and those on or about whom research is conducted. This asymmetry is not tied to the standpoint of the researcher per se but lies in the mode of knowledge production ([Speck 2021](#)). However, this asymmetry in the mode of science, which in certain aspects seems ineradicable and which presents a challenge particularly to participatory research designs ([Bergold and Thomas 2012](#)), also comes with a responsibility: a responsibility not only for the social and political “uses” to which the knowledge gained by research in the natural and social sciences, in technology or the humanities is put, but also to recognize the significance of ethical questions in the context of research itself, because of the potential power in this asymmetry and particularly with regard to questions of privilege and vulnerability ([von Unger 2021](#)). Responsibility also resides in academic teaching, that is to say, in instruction in themes, questions, theories, and methods. Our universities are spaces of learning and communication, though they are structured by an asymmetry between the person(s) grading and evaluating and those who are evaluated and depend on that evaluation. Not to abuse one’s own position of power as a (grading) teacher also means not to mistake the seminar primarily as a site of political mobilization or as a political gathering. This does mean that political matters should be exempt from discussion, it is merely a matter of how to discuss them.

By the same token, it might also be argued that the mode of politics ought to be defended against that of science, for instance in the context of activism. When young feminists are afraid to participate in political processes or raise their voices on political questions because they lack familiarity with the canon of gender studies or have not read or understood Judith Butler, this is a problem. It means that academic power has extended its reach into political debate. And for the very same reason it would be appropriate to take exception to a professor adopting a professorial habitus in an activist context or to criticize activists for seeking to derive academic capital from their political work and the collective knowledge production of many and thereby to improve their own economic position.

For all the proximity and entanglement between gender studies and the (queer/feminist) movement, we believe in the necessity of maintaining the reflexive separation between science and politics, between research and teaching on the one hand and forging alliances and mobilization on the other, and of reflecting the position and mode of one’s own speech, different rules, and existing asymmetries—not least as an aspect of social critique. We should make ourselves aware of what we are doing when and how, what logic we are and ought to be following at any given time. What is called for in both fields of practice is ultimately an ethical attitude, one of openness towards that which we fail to see or understand, of turning towards the voices, experiences, and ways of life with which we are not familiar and which are too often ignored. What is called for is an attitude that is aware of its own limitations and of the provisional nature of knowledge as well as of the ambivalences and possible paradoxical effects of its own political and/or scientific practice.