Kiri Olivia Santer

Academic Freedom and Anthropology

A Compass for Engaged Science in Authoritarian Times

In the call for this series, *boasblogs* asks for reflections upon a well-rehearsed binary: that of activist science versus non-activist science. In recent times, it is a binary that has increasingly developed a life outside of the academy. We see it circulating at different levels of politics and institutions, with different intensities; there have been declarations like when former French Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, Frédérique Vidal announced during her time in function that French universities were "corrupted by Islamo-leftism" (*islamo-gauchisme*). Along with other crass dismissals of entire disciplines, delegitimised for being partial (as was for example the case in Florida's war on "woke" sociology see (Luscombe 2026)), such declarations reproduce a clear dichotomy between "neutral" science, and partisan research. There are also the quieter practices that contribute to splitting knowledge production into camps of legitimate and illegitimate engagement of scientists with politics; for example, when university administrations issue guidelines that aim to ensure the neutrality of research that end up disqualifying approaches that question a certain state of the world. The binary of engaged versus 'neutral' science is thus operative in many imaginations of the role of science (much less so knowledge) within society. And beyond the question of whether science *should* be engaged (a question that I will come back to), the question of what constitutes engaged or activist science have been long debated. Yet, positions on engaged scholarship are much less collapsable into this dichotomous thinking than they are divided across epistemological traditions and across disciplines that are involved in producing knowledge.

Let's put to one side the critics of critique who reject the very idea that there is such a thing called "society" that is worth being analysed (Fassin 2017b) for one moment. Then we can see that even amongst social scientists there are different positions and

attitudes towards understanding structure, power, and society. There are for instance realists, who would tend to tell us *what* is happening; for example, what gender inequality looks like in terms of girls' access to education (how many girls, where, from which socio-economic background). Here social reality exists as facts that can be measured. There are then critical realists, who would strive more to explain *why* this inequality exists. Amongst the latter, there are also those who believe in objectivity. These might for example consider that the tools that humans have developed to understand and research the world (including the social world) are limited and situated but still, that there are objective realities that exist beyond human existence. So, attitudes towards criticality are not *necessarily* divided along quantitative and qualitative methodologies—although contemporary positivism does tend to run rife in the former. All this to say that across these different positions on critical knowledge, there are different positions on the role that science should play in society: i.e. what (if anything) to do with this knowledge, beyond the walls of the classroom, the university or beyond the pages of an academic journal article.

Of course, by and large, the myth of knowledge constituting a series of neutral facts that can be divorced from politics continues to underpin most dominant ideas of science which consider that science should be neutral. The problem with this naïve positivism, is that neutrality when equated with objectivity has often been complicit in marginalising public interest by siding with the status quo, government and market powers (Goldmann, n.d.). No knowledge production or scientific research takes place in a vacuum and the very questions that guide research are embedded in institutions, funding decisions and epistemological orientations that have their own political consequences.

That being said, there are important distinctions to be made between science and social change, politics and activism. This blog post does not argue for the collapsing of science and activism. Instead, it wishes to displace the false dichotomy posited above, seeing it much more as a continuum. Instead of arguing for a position on this

spectrum—whether activist science or scholar activism—it rather centres the importance of academic freedom as a shared value that should be defended across all disciplines. We live in dangerous times, where the legitimacy of scientists to engage in meaningful political debate is regularly put into question. My reasons for centring academic freedom over definitions of activist science are also strategic: I believe that academic freedom is a more encompassing and fundamental principle of scholarship. It is a concept and term which can be useful to come back to when faced with accusations that engaged scholarship does not constitute science and that it is 'simply' activism. It also avoids the binary with which I started this blog post. It is from within the principle of academic freedom which understands science as serving public interests, that debates around how best to exercise public engagement, can take place across different disciplinary traditions.

I understand academic freedom here as the principle that protects scholars' expertise for advancing "the common good" (Scott 2017; Butler 2022; Skaria 2025). Adam Sitze (2017, 598) has pointed out that academic inquiry is also predicated on "voluntary assumed forms of unfreedom"; meaning that as scholars, we subject our work to the rules of some sort of "truth procedure" (597). This commitment to internal rules from our own scientific community, is then also part of academic freedom. Importantly, academic freedom is not free speech, neither is it the market place of ideas or neutral facts where the quality of ideas has no role to play (Scott 2017). This has implications for engaged science; taking public positions is not a question of opinion. It is expertise informed by disciplined research, in service of the public. In light of this definition, first I will discuss how institutions of knowledge production and the scholars that work within them are linked to this notion of the common good. Then, I want to situate anthropology within this landscape whilst also making the case for anthropology as an analytically rigorous social science that strives to hold open the possibilities for human emancipation. Here, I address some problems I see with recent anthropological trends that precisely risk making anthropology an easy target for sceptics of non-positivist and critical endeavours to

delegitimise the discipline. Finally, I conclude on why good politics needs good scholarship.

Academic freedom as defined precisely as a right that can only be exercised collectively with the codes and methods of a discipline in service of a science for the public interest (Scott 2017, 7) *encompasses* engaged scholarship. Academic freedom in this sense of a public good cannot be separated from politics; as Judith Butler (2020, 29) states "politics is the sphere of the public good; it is the activity by which a people come together to debate their values and set a common course for their future". As institutions around us fall and are undone (from international law to the funding of critical thought at universities), scholars who care about engaged science but also pluralism and the radical openness of scientific inquiry do not necessarily need the same analysis of what we face or what has caused the current turn towards authoritarianism, but they need a shared sense of what is to be defended both against overtly fascistic voices *and* against liberal institutions that "quash the insurgent left" (Winant 2024) in the name of democracy or objectivity. This shared value to be defended, I argue, is a certain idea of academic freedom which is linked to the public good; this is what is right now under threat, from amongst others, those who take on (and weaponize) reduced and apolitical ideas of academic freedom. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP 2025) has for example recently expressed caution at institutions adopting policies of "institutional neutrality" in the name of protecting free speech and academic freedom, highlighting that this has sometimes led to imposed silences or to the disallowing of particular actions.

There are indeed different traditions or ideologies around academic freedom. Ajay Skaria (2025) identifies four: the Kantian tradition, John Dewey's version, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) first systemic modern codification of academic freedom and finally, what he calls the "egalitarian-minor" consensus. Out of these, emerge discourses that circulate today around academic

freedom: liberal-professional ones, that posit the university as "the site of an equality that is distinct from the equality of "the public" itself" (2025, 72) and the neoliberal ones that privatise education as a service. Both evacuate some form of relation to the public and therefore operate in apolitical versions of academic freedom; they eliminate the collective, societal dimension of scholarship. Both risk eclipsing, or even knowingly eliminating another conception of academic freedom which emerges from within the liberal tradition itself: the egalitarian-minor tradition, which is in many ways a "radicalization of the liberal-professional ideology" (2025, 73). It is this version of academic freedom that sees the production of knowledge as radically open to a common future, committed to publics beyond the classroom and the discipline, but still bound by values, codes and methodologies, and shared disciplinary governance. It is this tradition that also refuses a distinction between thought and action; precisely because to maintain the conditions ensuring the former may require action. Ajay Skaria cites Judith Butler who in 2006 already wrote about the need to consider the boycott of Israeli institutions because of their role in precisely hindering the actual *material* practice of academic freedom by Palestinian students and Faculty (Butler 2006). Academic freedom in this sense needs to be "claimed and exercised in concrete contexts" (Skaria 2025, 77) to prevent it from atrophying or become an empty signifier.

Anthropology is uniquely positioned to defend radical openness in scholarly enquiry and defend academic freedom in the egalitarian-minor tradition. Its own commitment to the plurality of the human experience can also contribute to "dislodging" certain liberal dispositions that mask a "disposition to value some lives over others" (Allen 2024, 154). This relates directly to the egalitarian minor tradition of academic freedom that Skaria develops in relation to the thinking of B. R. Ambedkar who famously drafted the Indian constitution. Ambedkar was not a theoretician of academic freedom, but Skaria points out that there were close links between him and several members of the AAUP Committee including Dewey (*ibid.*, 39). Skaria uses Ambedkar's conception of justice, with its attention to the singular

injustice—how it was produced, and how positions have been minoritised, how dispossession is experienced—to contrast with the abstract egalitarianism of Dewey. Ambedkar was therefore inspired by Dewey but went beyond him, precisely in a way that mirrors what scientists and scholars do best: building on the shortcomings of those who have inspired them. We might draw a direct parallel here also to what anthropology is good at; studying the particular and putting it into relation with broader abstractions, whether these be broader liberal ideals or macro-structural constraints or processes. Anthropology has long linked the production of difference to the production of inequality (Eckert 2016, 242-43), a link that stands in obvious tension with the equality we share simply by being human (Skaria 2025, 55). This may explain the discipline's particular propensity for engaged scholarship.

Now I want to spend a moment examining what engaged scholarship looks like from the perspective of anthropology and relate it back to the issue of academic freedom. In recent years, anthropology has seen different terms emerge from "militant ethnography" to "activist ethnography" to "participatory ethnography" that point to forms of scholarly engagement, that imply particular orientations towards either social movements, ideas of social justice or social change. These approaches, along with the "hyperbolic use of critique as a mere mantra" (Didier Fassin 2017b, 5) in anthropology have led to some confusion and, at times, prescriptive views, about what engaged anthropology might look like. Why is this important? As I have highlighted towards the beginning of my text, the current moment is one in which academic freedom and precisely a properly political version of academic freedom is under threat. This means that we have to be precise and strategic when we advocate for anthropology to be engaged. I think it is important to point out that engaged (Kirsch 2018) or 'public' anthropology (Fassin 2017) cannot be boiled down to a form of collaborative or participatory research that necessarily works horizontally and participatively 'with' social movements (what should researchers studying up or with interlocutors they disagree with do? Can they not practice engaged scholarship?). Nor is the anthropologist simply an amplifier of the "lived experiences" of her

research interlocutor (see Casey 2024 and; Voronka 2016 for critical perspectives on the politics of "lived experience"). There are important differences between observations, interpretations and what we do with this knowledge; and these differences matter, particularly today when science as a whole is under attack.

In a sense, here I would argue that anthropology would sometimes benefit from being reminded of the critical realist tradition of science which defines science as the real mechanisms that lead to observable phenomena and the human condition, itself shaped by the complex, structured, and multi-levelled interactions of the "powerful particulars that underlie them" (Bhaskar and Callinicos 2003, 90; see also Bhaskar 1997). I would agree with Alf Hornborg (2017) here that anthropology should not "dither while the planet burns". Ethnography is a method that provides material that needs to be employed to provide analysis of how these particularities of the human condition are shaped and structured by social, political and economic forces. Anthropology is not only ethnography, and it is not a synonym for activism; it is a discipline with a particular method that provides for expertise. When Stuart Kirsch testifies as an expert-scholar in court cases opposing communities in New Guinea and mining conglomerates, he is precisely using his academic credentials, which are also based on specific methodological standards and community governance of a discipline. He is not doing so as a member of that particular affected community. Didier Fassin circulated his research on French *banlieues* policing (Dider Fassin 2011) beyond academia (Didier Fassin 2017a) and this provoked a public debate on the role of the police in producing and maintaining a particular, racialised social order. This what not collaborative research with the police. It was the work of a social scientist, conducting a long-term ethnography of a particular professional group.

Stuart Hall in a 1983 memorial lecture that marked one hundred years since Karl Marx's death, held at the University of Birmingham spoke of Marx's relationship to scholarship. To Marx, the world and its history were huge and complex and so, Hall develops, had to be the tools for understanding it. The tools would be "as complex as

the history itself" he said. I quote him in full:

"the purpose of doing that [understanding the world] was to understand how the past had shaped the present, so that we could make the future. And the idea that there would be some neat line, which one could draw between the commitment to understanding and analysis and the commitment to revolutionary politics, was something which Marx constantly denied (...). He was constantly oscillating and moving between those two roles;" (Sheffield City Archives 1983)

There are two things I want to underline here; first, is the emphasis on the future that remains open and second, is the mention of precisely two roles: the analyst and the committed revolutionary. I would dare to put forward that few academics nowadays would consider themselves revolutionaries. However, the point is that good politics requires good scholarship. Scholarship is not the only way of pointing out the ineluctable equality of all human life. There are of course other ways than through academic scholarship for these realisations to emerge and to lead to collective action. But scholarship can be one way. And anthropology remains uniquely positioned to analyse precisely how human life is *rendered* unequal, as well as studying the actual struggles that have or that strive to contribute to the material realisation of that equality.

For the pursuit of knowledge to be able to still exist as a material practice which values the holding open of possibilities for human emancipation, we precisely need academic freedom; to continue to be able to go beyond prescriptive or seemingly self-explanatory normative frameworks and ideas. Academic freedom is also a modest and privileged space in which openness, transformation, participation can be learned and experienced. We need to defend the version of academic freedom which upholds the very possibilities for pluralistic thought; which trains in the art of disagreement and critique, and which fosters the ability to analyse and reason, together with others who have done so before us. We, and here the 'we' encompasses faculty of all disciplines, need to defend academic freedom for any

such thing as activist science to even be able to continue to exist within the university today.

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Kiri Olivia Santer is a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies at the University of Bern, Switzerland. Her research examines the contested meanings and practices around regulation and law, with an emphasis on the EU's political and economic relations to the Global South. She has conducted ethnographic research on the EU border assemblage and the outsourcing of migration control to Libya, and more recently on the regulation of trade for the green transition, focusing on carbon pricing and metal value chains. She is the author of *The Borders of Responsibility: Migration Control in the Mediterranean Sea* (Duke University Press 2026) and her work has been published in *Anthropological Theory*, Social & *Legal Studies*, *Globalizations*, *Journal of Cultural Economy and Economy & Society*.