A DIALOGUE ON THE EROSION, SUBVERSION, AND RECLAMATION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

P. Mahabeer*
Department of Curriculum and Education Studies
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4576-690X

N. Amin*
University Teaching and Learning Office
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4551-5046

*University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex landscape of academic freedom in South African higher education and explores its historical context, challenges and perspectives. Using a dialogue-based approach, we examine the mechanisms of erosion and control that threaten academic freedom, as well as the strategies to subvert and reclaim it. A triad of theoretical lenses is employed to interpret the dialogue, drawing on the works of Foucault, Marcuse and Crenshaw. The article emphasises the paradoxical nature of academic freedom, drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of the pharmakon. We argue for a contextual approach to academic freedom that recognises both its crucial importance for social progress and its potential for abuse. The paper concludes with a call for continued critical reflection, institutional reform and a commitment to promoting diverse and inclusive academic communities as important steps towards redefining academic freedom in the South African context.

Keywords: Academic freedom, dialogic approach, institutional reform, South African higher education

INTRODUCTION

In his groundbreaking dissertation "Against Method" (1970), Paul Feyerabend challenged the usual approach to writing doctoral theses by employing discourse strategies that brought readers closer to his idea of an "anarchist epistemology". Feyerabend's dissertation is considered one of the most influential works in the field of philosophy and is seen as a subversive act of academic freedom, liberated from the imposed boundaries of conventional academic writing

conventions, and for the right to choose the methods of academic research. From the perspective of Erich Fromm (1941), who distinguished between "freedom from" (also called "negative freedom") and "freedom to" (also called "positive freedom"), Feyerabend's act encompasses both positive and negative aspects of freedom.

Academic independence has evolved considerably throughout history. Stone (2015) identified ancient Athens as the origin of this concept but noted that its general recognition did not occur until the 12th Century with the rise of modern universities. Traditionally, academic freedom has been characterised by meritocratic work, independent research and teaching (Watkins 2009; Tierney and Lechuga 2005). In recent decades, however, the way in which academic freedom is conceptualised and practiced has changed significantly. Universities have expanded their teaching and laboratory-based research foci to actively advocate for freedom of expression (Altbach 2015). In effect, it reflects a shift from isolation in ivory towers to open debates about the limits and constraints of academic freedom in society. It has thus become necessary to seek profound understanding of the nature of academic freedom.

In this study we explore the notion of academic freedom in two ways: vigorous engagement with literature and defying traditional, scholarly writing norms. Our approach is not reckless defiance. Instead, it maintains scholarly rigour by combining theory and personal observations of the challenges and reclamation of academic freedom by applying a dialogic technique and traditional signposts to produce a "writerly text" (Barthes 1974). The voices of the authors, symbolised by the initials of their first names, "P" and "N", are reminiscent of Feyerabend's (1970) approach. While existing academic writing norms exhibit traditional features and constraints, Feyerabend's approach allows scholars to enact academic freedom. We focus on the power relations in academia that simultaneously contest and reinforce established institutional structures and analyse the impact of hidden harmful practices in academia. We conclude with possible pathways that can lead to renewal and opportunities to reclaim academic freedom.

CONCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

> N: "I believe that there are too many perspectives, creating a battleground for conflicting interests and perspectives".
>
> P: "Well, certainly, the debates on academic freedom in South African universities are multi-layered and complex. I don't think we can rely on a definition."

The literature on academic freedom reflects the views of both authors. While academic freedom theoretically guarantees that university staff and students can engage intellectually without fear

of censorship, Davids (2021) notes that current practice shows a tendency towards restriction rather than openness. Academics around the world face deplatforming and censorship, not for misconduct, but for expressing certain viewpoints or exploring sensitive topics from controversial perspectives (Darbyshire et al. 2021). The encroachment on academic freedom manifests itself through state pressure, academic capitalism, interference from special interests, socialised conformity requirements and a pervasive culture of fear (Holt 2020).

Lackey (2018) explains that academic freedom is the right of scholars to acquire knowledge, conduct research, and express ideas without undue censorship, institutional restrictions, or fear of reprisal. This concept goes beyond intellectual freedom and includes several structured safeguards to protect the academic enterprise. For example, Butler (2017) believes that academic freedom transcends individual rights because it is a fundamental element of university life that supports academics in the acquisition of knowledge and interdisciplinary intellectual engagement.

A clear distinction between academic freedom and institutional autonomy is necessary, according to Butler (2017), as these terms are often conflated. Robinson and Moulton (2002) describe institutional autonomy as the ability of institutions to decide independently on academic issues, including curricula and teaching methods. Kori (2016) counters that despite their independence, institutions can impose restrictive ideologies on students and academic staff, which does not guarantee academic freedom. There is undoubtedly a contradictory relationship between academic freedom, underpinned by self-governance and expertise, and external accountability systems (Butler 2009). The conflict over the boundaries of academic research and its means of expression reveals a fundamental tension.

In essence, universities act as the critical conscience of society (Wolhuter and Langa 2021), a role that requires institutional autonomy without outside interference. However, the introduction of market-driven models combined with greater state intervention has eroded academic independence (Traianou 2016; Rostan 2010). Although academic freedom remains fundamentally linked to the right to education (Kori 2016), market-orientated institutions subvert this right as poor students are unable to access higher education due to unaffordability. Part of this erosion can be attributed to the growing expectations of the economic and social importance of universities (Rostan 2010). Thus, we observe that academic freedom is increasingly limited to the expression of expert opinion rather than the formation of worldviews (Fuller 2009). The perception of university autonomy has also changed, as the role of the state has shifted from regulation to evaluation (Enders, de Boer and Weyer 2013). Considering these new developments and the complications created by the introduction of neoliberal frameworks,

the academic community and universities appear to be grappling with multiple demands for accountability, relevance and intellectual independence (Collini 2017).

Although academic freedom is a constitutional right, it faces practical obstacles that need to be overcome (Kori 2016). Some scholars view the discourse on academic freedom as an opportunity to transform and decolonise knowledge (Murove and Mazibuko 2009). The discourse is linked to the history of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. Some believe that the arguments in favour of academic freedom serve to preserve advantages passed down through generations (Taylor and Taylor 2010). For Higgins (2013) and Kori (2016), the applicability of academic freedom is questioned when management constraints and state intervention are taken into account. According to Coetzee (2016), recent student movements have challenged established views of academic freedom. Habib, Morrow and Bentley (2008) suggest that to resolve these difficulties, certain academics propose a "republican" strategy that is linked to social responsibility. The debate on academic freedom in South Africa is thus ongoing and reflects more important social issues and the ongoing reform process in higher education (Du Toit 2022; Davids 2021; Badat 2020; Jansen 2019).

GLOBAL AND AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

N: "Only about 20 per cent of the global population lives in countries where academic freedom enjoys robust protection (Bothwell 2021). It seems that academic freedom is facing ever-greater challenges worldwide. What are the main threats that we see in the different contexts?"

P: "The challenges are complex. We are seeing increasing government intervention, commercialisation pressures and technological disruption, fundamentally changing the environment in which academic freedom operates."

Our observation is in line with the growing number of academic studies describing these new threats. A global overview of these challenges shows an upward trend in the restriction of academic freedom in recent years. Research by Ignatieff and Roch (2018) identifies threats such as state interference and institutional censorship in various national settings. Additionally, the commercialisation of universities exacerbates current problems by aligning intellectual research with corporate needs and market demands (Lynch and Ivancheva 2015), highlighted as a threat to academic freedom more than two decades ago by Tierney (2001).

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy at universities have been severely affected by the changes that have simultaneously impacted working conditions since the 1980s (Fitzgerald, White and Gunter 2012). Various social dynamics and crises such as social unrest and pandemics combined with issues of gender inequality, brain drain, and institutional survival

ploys have led to changes. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a key moment in the ongoing transformation of education as it forced education institutions to rapidly shift to virtual learning platforms. The sudden shift not only accelerated the adoption of technology, it also exacerbated technological inequalities between those with access and those without, especially in areas with limited resources (Ostry, Loungani and Furceri 2020). The unequal distribution of technological resources is a significant barrier to fair access to academic freedom, as exercising freedom now requires technological skills that many lack.

Furthermore, the increasing implementation of neoliberal management strategies in higher education makes this environment even more complex. Mama's (2006) critical analysis of the efficiency - excellence debate in academia highlights the incremental influence of neoliberal tendencies. For example, the use of standardised metrics is now an entrenched norm for monitoring and evaluating academic performance. Standardised metrics are unproductive because they set narrow performance indicators that ignore complexity and contextual specificities. Reducing intellectual labour to quantifiable outcomes undermines the creativity and critical thinking that are essential to meaningful academic freedom.

It is clear that the restrictions imposed by the state, market control over research activities and increasing technological inequality are growing worldwide. In practice it means that both direct restrictions and indirect influences must be addressed, while recognising the fundamental importance of academic freedom for the promotion of critical research and the development of future alternatives. We turn in particular to developments in Africa.

N: "What form do the global challenges to academic freedom take when considered in the African context? Do we need to consider any problems?"

P: "The African continent presents a complicated environment for academic freedom as it struggles with both colonial history and current development challenges."

A contextual analysis of academic freedom in Africa is essential due to the complex nature of the continent. As we move from global patterns to regional realities on the African continent in our analysis, the findings of Mama (2006) are relevant. She argues that the South African higher education systems have not evolved organically; instead, the country has been influenced by regional crises and changing global perspectives. The pan-African environment is being shaped by intense interest of the continent and growing knowledge-based economies. The end result is that the debates regarding academic freedom, institutional autonomy and social responsibility is being driven by global players. Africa, it appears is being manipulated by global agendas and hegemony. Mama argues that the global agendas are the source of instability in Africa due to conflicting interests, creating a complex layer for redefining academic freedom that is centred

on building a socially active intellectual culture. Academic freedom is part of the larger struggle for social justice, democratic principles and social change. In other words, academic freedom is not restricted to freedom in academia (Mama 2006).

Based on readings cited, academic freedom is a complex and dynamic phenomenon comprising the history of Africa, current challenges and a future reliant on technology. Notions of academic freedom are also caught up in the vortex of African management approaches, government policies and political diversity.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

N: "Academic freedom in South Africa is a unique object of study due to the historical transition from apartheid to a democratic system. Although academic freedom has been constitutionally protected since 1994, many academics continue to face restrictions. Why is there this paradox?"

P: "Your views touch on a key area of conflict that needs exploration, as the experience of post-apartheid academic freedom shows that legal protections do not always match actual conditions. Institutional practices continue to reflect historical power relations."

South Africa is a fascinating study of how global interests and continental challenges are shaping academic freedom discourses despite its unusual history and move towards democracy. During apartheid, a divisive two-track system was created, namely, privileged open institutions (historically White universities) and tightly controlled other institutions (historically Black universities) leading to a situation of different claims to academic freedom (Kori 2016). Decades later, unequal funding, ideological differences and the country's flawed historical legacy have largely hindered progressive institutional development and curriculum transformation.

With the establishment of democracy, the South African Constitution of 1994 included a provision that protected academic freedom. Since then, the drive to create a unified national higher education system through cooperative governance has translated into increased state control and intervention and has raised concerns about the independence of institutions (ASSAf 2020; Kori 2016; Higgins 2013). The 2006 study by Waghid, Bartlett and Fataar shows that comprehensive state regulation of universities threatens institutional independence and academic freedom. According to their analysis, state funding creates constraints that hinder professional autonomy and academic performance, jeopardising independent scientific research.

In the post-1994 period, the intense advocacy for academic freedom during apartheid declined significantly as academics no longer viewed the state as hostile (Higgins 2013), despite

the enactment of the 1997 Higher Education Act and its amendments, which strengthened government authority and curtailed institutional independence (Kori 2016). Ironically, the oppression of the past persists in modern society through subtle methods of control and exclusion, even after democratic systems have been introduced. For example, ethics review committees can halt approval processes for sensitive subjects, while inappropriate ideologies remain unchanged in postgraduate education. Furthermore, academics practice self-censorship to avoid a backlash against controversial ideas that contradict established policy (Blell, Liu and Verma 2022a). Black academics concerned with issues of ethnicity and injustice face unequal pressures that represent their struggle for authentic cultural and ideological independence rather than basic social inclusion (Blell et al. 2022b). The #RhodesMustFall movement is an example of the struggle to decolonise university programmes, diversify staff and the inclusion of marginalised perspectives.

South African universities, which have been described as “transplants” (extensions) of Western university models with institutional autonomy, are under pressure today (Wolhuter and Langa 2021). For example, academics are caught between two powerful forces. They are under pressure from top-down management structures (at national and institutional level) and an increasingly powerful and vocal student body that jeopardises institutional integrity and societal roles (Jones et al. 2020). The introduction of academic freedom in post-apartheid South Africa has not eliminated the power structures of apartheid, which continue to influence university governance and decision-making (Jansen 2017). The dominance of Eurocentric perspectives in many disciplines means that indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies continue to be marginalised (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Furthermore, historically white institutions often have greater resources and research capacity, perpetuating inequalities in academic production and influence (Swartz et al. 2018).

Historically marginalised academics in precarious positions face more severe consequences for their views, including psychological intimidation, harassment and legal repercussions, with women academics of colour facing increased scrutiny and challenges to their authority (Blell et al. 2022b). Black women, in particular, are doubly marginalised by cultural and gender biases (Ramohai 2019; Divala 2014). Consequently, academic freedom in South African higher education is hampered by prevailing gender inequalities. The increasing number of women employed in the sector has neither eliminated or reduced stereotypes nor decentred male-dominated leadership positions.

At present, debates on academic freedom in South Africa are complicated by a complex set of factors that include progressive constitutional principles and immutable gender norms, institutional cultures and leadership approaches. Legal protections do not appear to be sufficient

to change the dynamics of authority in higher education. A deeper understanding is needed to assess the extent of progress made and the challenges that remain.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: ACADEMIC FREEDOM, SUBVERSION AND POWER DYNAMICS

In pursuit of deepening our understanding the forces that influence academic freedom in higher education, three theoretical approaches are deployed: Marcuse's concept of subversion, Foucauldian power/knowledge analysis and Crenshaw's intersectional theory.

N: "Herbert Marcuse's (1964) idea of subversiveness is intriguing. According to him, subversiveness arises from the liberation of the imagination from social rules, which allows us to explore ideas that go beyond accepted standards. Subversive voices push boundaries by proposing new social structures that disrupt accepted norms and force a re-evaluation of standard ideas."

P: "Certainly, the power of subversive intellectual work to challenge the authority that academic freedom so hotly debates. Its ability to expose oppression and inspire visions of a better future disrupts the status quo. Elite groups feel threatened and seek to limit radical ideas through coercion or incentives that mitigate criticism."

The dialogue between us highlights Marcuse's critical lens based on his text The One-Dimensional Man (2016). The text explores the dominance of ideological inclinations over free thought while offering ways to subvert authority. Furthermore, the notion of the "great refusal" (Marcuse 1964) suggests critical ways to reject tyrannical and repressive patterns of thought. Critical theory requires conscious efforts to resist epistemic structures that favour western knowledge that does not conform to local contexts (Bhambra and De Sousa Santos 2023). Posthumanism, which is also based on the principles of critical thinking, expands the battlefield for academic freedom as it is intertwined with questionable technological progress and non-human ecologies (Braidotti 2019).

Michel Foucault's analysis of power (1980) is the second theoretical basis for this study. Power, according to Foucault, is both repressive and productive. In academic institutions, there is a close relationship between the subtle exercise of power and the production of subversive knowledge. Applying Foucault's analysis of power allows us to examine what knowledge is valid and who is allowed to create it. Three recent Foucauldian studies show the mechanisms of control and authority. As universities embrace neoliberalism, disciplinary power is increasingly used to manipulate academic behaviour (Morrissey 2020), while neoliberal governmentality introduces new forms of surveillance through mechanisms linked to quality control, impact measurement and accountability (Ball 2022). The study by Bacevic (2021)

provides a critical analysis of the connections between epistemic justice, material inequalities and the production of knowledge.

In South Africa, the Foucauldian view shows how power relations persist despite the formal transition to democracy. As Habib et al. (2008) argue, academic freedom is threatened by multiple actors: the state, institutional bureaucrats and senior academics themselves. The dynamic between institutional independence and academic freedom is made more complex by the rise of managerialism and the corporatisation of universities, which establish market-driven disciplinary practices rather than supporting academic research.

N: "We must not forget the impact of academic structures on marginalised communities within universities. Formal measures have been taken to bring about change, but Black women academics and other groups continue to be disadvantaged by the prevailing power structures."

P: "Ramohai's 2019 study shows that neutral practices of promotion and research productivity can lead to discriminatory outcomes. Subtle subversive behaviours such as microaggressions and cultural marginalisation undermine Black women's academic belonging and legitimacy."

The third theoretical lens is based on intersectionality theory, originally developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and updated by Crenshaw et al. (2022). Intersectionality uncovers practices of oppression based on social factors such as ethnicity, gender and socioeconomics. More recently, Collins and Bilge (2020) argue that intersectionality is both an analytical tool and a critical practice. In higher education, intersecting identities combined with seemingly neutral academic practices can lead to successful or unsuccessful experiences, that favour some individuals and disadvantage others. In particular, many Black women in junior positions have a heavy teaching workload, less time for research and no access capital from influential research networks (Ramohai 2019). The exclusion of Black women has been normalised in higher education systems hindering their aspirations and advancement (Zulu 2020; Divala 2014).

These three perspectives, namely critical theory, power/knowledge analysis and intersectionality theory, provide an integrated. framework for analysing the complex dynamics of academic freedom, subversion and power in South African higher education.

METHODOLOGY: DIALOGIC INQUIRY AS ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The methodology for this study combines a review of selected literature with theoretical analysis and dialogue. The methodology is critical in nature and draws on the works of Michel Foucault (1980), Jacques Derrida (1981) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021). In this approach

dialogue serves multiple purposes. It reflects the collaborative nature of our science. It allows us to present our points of view and rational arguments. It also provides a creative dimension that brings readers closer to the lived experiences of some academics. To illustrate this approach, consider the following exchange on our initial methodological reflections:

N: "How can we communicate our thoughts on academic freedom? How do we write creatively? "

P: "Why not use dialogue as a subversive act?"

N: "Great idea. It would also be an act of academic freedom. Dialogue will take us away from just presenting a dry academic analysis. Our voices need to be heard."

P: "It will also allow us to highlight the tensions between different perspectives. We can explore how Foucault's ideas on disciplinary power relate to the subtle ways academic freedom is eroded, while also considering Derrida's (1981) pharmakon, the poison and the remedy concept. Using dialogue as a social science approach is also a way of resisting the Western traditions of science scholarship."

N: "That may not be entirely true, because Western critical theory has given us the tools of critique. Ironically, the weapons of the West can be used to challenge the West – the pharmakon at work, an act of subversion."

P: "Although the origins of critique may be disputed, there are scholars who are leaders in the field of decolonisation like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021). We can commit to anti-colonial acts of resistance by honouring indigenous approaches to knowing the world and take the opportunity to redefine the meaning of research from and within the community (Smith 2021). More importantly, as study participants and inquirers, we become collaborators connected to research as a collective (Datta 2018:16)."

Although the dialogic approach is not entirely new in academic literature (see, for example, the dialogue between two characters on the interpretation of Plato's Phaedrus and the concept of "pharmakon" in Guy Shaked's (2004) homage to Jacques Derrida), it offers an innovative way of discussing issues of academic freedom. It is closely linked to indigenous forms of knowledge and challenges traditional Western academic paradigms. As Datta (2018:2) argues: "Decolonisation is an ongoing process of becoming, unlearning and relearning in terms of who we are as researchers and educators and taking responsibility for participants."

Our dialogical approach is consistent with indigenous epistemologies and postmodern Western philosophical traditions (Best and Kellner 1991). Indigenous approaches, with their emphasis on relational knowing, holism, and the connectedness of the researcher and the researched (Smith 2021), challenge deeply embedded academic paradigms. Postmodernism has also played an important role in deconstructing traditional notions of science and reshaping our understanding of scientific knowledge and research (Lyotard 1984; Feyerabend 1993). By integrating both, we can weave a web of ideas that reflects the diverse and globalised nature of

modern science. By looking at academic freedom from different angles, from the indigenous emphasis on knowledge as a shared responsibility to the postmodern critique of power structures in science, we can better understand its intricacies. This includes the connection to Derrida's (1981) deconstruction of ambiguity inherent in language, which is particularly relevant when we engage with the amorphous notion of academic freedom, and to Foucault's (1980) analysis of power relations in the production of knowledge, which can help to recognise subtle mechanisms of erosion or reinforcement in academic freedom.

THE EROSION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In this section three methods of control will be discussed: bureaucratic control, funding costs and toxicity, and lastly a discussion about the organisation of epistemic knowledge.

N: "It is frustrating to see how ethics committees and university administration create procedural hurdles for research that is considered politically sensitive."

P: "Yes, I have heard of cases where doctoral proposals are rejected for being too political. Sometimes, it depends on the whims of the review panel or the voice of authority of a professor."

The dialogic exchange has several overlapping components and thus illustrates the complex nature of bureaucratic control. For example, N's negative observations of ethics committees illustrate how bureaucratic procedures, which are supposed to ensure the quality and ethics of research, ultimately serve as a political filter. This has a particular impact when research has the potential to challenge widely held assumptions or enter politically sensitive terrain. The opacity of the administration, as seen here, is the main feature that makes this form of control effective. Restrictions on academic research are disguised as administrative problems rather than direct forms of oppression. The subjectivity of bureaucratic obstacles is evident in "the voice of authority" and "the whims of the review panel" through which hierarchical power, or arbitrariness, allows gatekeepers to decide what is considered acceptable research.

Against this backdrop, such observations offer a portrait of a form of bureaucratic control that is highly damaging given the environment in which it takes place.

N: "Let's not overlook the importance of finance. Funding committees usually select research proposals that have minimal risk."

The above quotation is a short commentary describing how budget allocation serves as an instrument of control in the academic world. Research is a costly endeavour. The example of

N's comment shows how both direct restrictions on research and the targeted support of certain projects through funding undermine academic freedom. This method works because of its indirect nature; it does not resort to censorship. In effect, the academic system gives researchers the formal freedom to choose their research topic and then pressures them to follow normative lines of enquiry thus nullifying freedom of choice.

Toxicity in the academic workspace can also play a role in how people treat each other. The next exchange illustrates this:

N: "The educational environment harbours a potential for toxicity. In my experience, I have witnessed situations where influential people have used bullying strategies to create hostile work environments that disproportionately affect women and marginalised communities."

P: "Toxic work environments create psychological pressure that serves as a control mechanism, forcing individuals to self-censor and restrict academic freedom."

N's comment views hostile work environments as a mechanism of control based on emotional and psychological factors rather than on tangible limits. For instance, 25 per cent of academics in the UK have been bullied by a colleague or in a team for having views that they did not agree with (Karran and Mallinson 2017; Darbyshire et al. 2021). Hierarchies offer an arsenal to control individuals professionally and privately, and the techniques of control of an individual relate to larger social disparities. The discussion in the post showed how institutional and organisational procedures and psychological conditions narrow the space for academic freedom (the perception that a subject is too risky or not worth it) (Hoepner 2019) and how power structures shape academic capacities and what the field perceived as possible or not.

The research and publication activity are also being limited by self-censorship and internalised barriers by self-monitoring. According to Bourdieu (1977), symbolic violence is a process by which an individual is forced to perceive the external limits as internal freedom. The awareness of these aspects reveals several interrelated mechanisms of control (Foucault 1989). First, the immediate identification of stakeholders is the primary act of intervention through coercion and repression designed to explicitly punish or discourage problematic ideas. Second, the incentives that push back the critical limit are a complex system that offers various rewards to misdirect intellectual efforts from potentially antagonistic enquiry. Together, self-censorship, coercion and repression systematically label research interests as radical or subversive and labels others as neutral or objective.

The control mechanisms make it clear why academic freedom has reached its limits. The creation of knowledge threatens existing social structures and causes those in power to restrict academic freedom beyond the mere exercise of power. The power of knowledge to expose

oppression and create promising futures for the marginalised shows why the transformative capacity of intellectual labour is perceived as a threat (Connell 2019; Mirowski 2018). Restrictions on academic freedom serve as protective measures to prevent the emergence and dissemination of transformative ideas and the maintenance of epistemic hierarchies. Hierarchical systems privilege the generation of knowledge that reinforces existing power structures and disregard knowledge that might undermine these structures, e.g. epistemologies of the South (De Sousa Santos 2007) or the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems (Smith 2012). This process works by branding undesirable research as political. However, we must remember that all research is political (Foucault 1980) and that theoretical frameworks such as Said's Orientalism (1978) identify the political aspects in the processes of knowledge production. Furthermore, the research of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) provides concrete examples of marginalised indigenous knowledge and the functioning of epistemic hierarchies in a post-apartheid context.

RECLAIMING ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The dialogue allows us to consider methods of resistance and recovery. In our discussions, patterns emerged that show the restoration of academic freedom by creating alternative spaces and altered knowledge production in conjunction with strategic subversion. We conclude this section with a critique of subversive academic freedom practices.

N: 'There is potential for resistance in academic circles. We can create counter-hegemonic spaces, we can communicate our dissent in a discreet way.'

P: "I've done that by turning to the scholarship on decolonisation (Mahabeer 2018; 2020) as an active way of transforming knowledge production and empowering marginalised voices. This involves moving beyond reactive critique and focusing instead on positive freedoms that enable individual and collective self-actualisation."

N: "My resistance has been to work outside the canon and in multi-disciplinary spaces, which tones down the authoritative voice of dominance." (Amin 2016; 2008; Amin and Campbell 2014).

Our discussion has identified four overlapping approaches to resistance: creating anti-hegemonic spaces, embracing multidisciplinary, enacting decolonial knowledge practices, amplifying marginalised voices and diminishing authoritarian voices. Motta (2013) calls these strategies "prefigurative epistemologies"; knowledge practices that embody the desired changes.

We start with anti-hegemony, where Gramsci's (1971) ideas support our analysis about spatial practices that provide alternative praxis within a dominating system. The formation of

reading groups, informal networks, community-based collaboration and alternative publication platforms creates a protective space where critical ideas can grow without censure. This approach is powerful because it suggests that resistance can be successful even when not overtly expressed. Scott's (1990) term, infrapolitics' can be used to describe covert forms of resistance that are invisible to authority while cultivating the potential for overt resistance. In other words, critical researchers can build intellectual networks that preserve counter-narratives beyond an institution's constraints. The point about the possibility for resistance despite the persistence of orthodox views aligns with Holloway's (2010) concept of looking for "cracks" in an apparently solid power structure. Small cracks create big fissures, as seen in the example of the paradigm wars in the 1980s when positivism was contested as the only legitimate worldview for research. As more people spoke up, qualitative research eventually was accepted as legitimate research (Bryman 2008). Harney and Moten (2013) use the term "undercommons" to describe these counter-hegemonic spaces. Successful resistance, we argue, begins with creating conditions for imagining and realising other choices, rather than starting with direct confrontations with authority.

Another subversive tactic is the strategic use of multidisciplinary functions to challenge disciplinary power structures while creating opportunities for previously overlooked knowledge. The practice of working outside the canon is a way to resist metropole knowledge (Connell 2019) by challenging the inherent authority given to certain books, techniques and questions with hierarchical privilege. Amin (2016) considers multidisciplinary work as "curriculum without borders", spaces where multiple knowledge systems freely interact with each other without claims to authority, while De Sousa Santos (2007) describes multidisciplinarity as "borderlands" for creating knowledge ecologies through horizontal dialogue rather than vertical dominance. Through this approach, we can push back the dominant voice that claims exclusive knowledge and silences alternative views by bringing perspectives from different disciplines into the conversation. True multidisciplinary practices break through the central divisions between fields of knowledge that perpetuate epistemic hierarchies. Traditional methods merely combine ideas from different fields rather than challenging epistemic hierarchies. This could lead to what Bhambra (2014) describes as "networked sociologies" that emerge when connections between different knowledge traditions are explored.

P's work on decolonisation (Mahabeer 2018; 2020) is emblematic of the third subversive strategy, namely, "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo 2009), which functions as a theoretical framework and as an actual practice for transforming knowledge. Epistemic disobedience

recognises that decolonisation requires both the integration of previously excluded perspectives and a complete overhaul of methods of knowledge generation, review and dissemination.

Tuck and Yang's (2012) distinction between decolonisation as metaphor and decolonisation as actual practice becomes clear when examining the differences between reactive critique and positive freedoms. The method critiques colonial knowledge structures while actively constructing new ways of producing knowledge that highlight once marginalised epistemologies. The concept of "engaged pedagogy" (Hooks 1994) combines knowledge creation with liberation practice, linking intellectual freedom with broader personal and communal empowerment through individual and collective self-realisation. Epistemic disobedience counters the epistemic violence that systematically silences subaltern perspectives through knowledge practices that reject their validity (Spivak 1988).

Our conversation leads us to identify the combination of the targeted amplification of marginalised voices and the planned dismantling of authoritarian rule as our fourth strategy. This approach develops from and builds on the previous three strategies. Collins (2000) describes this strategy as an "outsider on the inside" that uses institutional positioning to create space for perspectives that challenge established organisational norms. The practice of "weakening the authoritarian voice of dominance" demonstrates how academic authority operates beyond mere prohibitions and epistemological structures through multiple dimensions such as tone of voice and citations. According to Ahmed (2012), the feminist academic chooses not to support harmful institutional norms even if it would disrupt institutional harmony. The approach opens the possibility of creating "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988) as they recognise their own subjective positions rather than asserting a universal authority and refuse to support authoritarian voices that uphold epistemic hierarchies. The situated knowledge approach is in line with Nixon's (2017) concept of "slow science", which opposes the fast-paced academic environment of neoliberal institutions that prioritise quick results over careful consideration of marginal perspectives. Mills (2007) describes this technique as "white ignorance", the wilful ignorance that perpetuates racial inequalities through the production of knowledge. The strategy of dismantling authoritarian dominance corresponds to Morreira's (2017) idea of "stepping aside" to make space for previously suppressed perspectives.

Through our conversation, we developed an understanding of resistance. The concept of resistance works through everyday strategies of opposition, which De Certeau (1984) refers to as "tactics of the weak". These are everyday practices that operate within power structures and challenge them without directly confronting them. Butler's (1993) paradox of subjectivisation shows that resistance must work within the systems it seeks to change. The result is that

academia can regain its intellectual independence from institutional constraints that would otherwise prevent it from doing so.

The notion of power as an unchanging monolithic force should be rejected (Gibson-Graham 2006). Instead, we should recognise the potential for institutional change despite its seemingly totalising nature. Academics who participate in these linked forms of resistance can engage in what Mohanty (2003) describes as "building solidarity across difference". This process leads to coalitions that emerge through a collective commitment to changing practices of knowledge production for the benefit of larger social justice goals. For example, measures to reclaim academic freedom have evolved from formal institutional measures to informal collaborations characterised by community support, professional generosity, acceptance of vulnerability and reflective collegiality (Jones et al. 2020). Probably the most important and sustainable approach to protecting and restoring academic freedom when intellectual rights are threatened are academic rescue programmes (see e.g. Adebayo 2022).

Although academic freedom enjoys broad support, there is a danger that subversive actions in favour of unrestricted academic freedom will develop into an uncontrollable power that can easily be abused. The tension between freedom of expression and responsibility to historically marginalised communities is a divisive issue (Quinn 2023; Booi, Vincent and Liccardo 2017). A greater emphasis on certain freedoms without appropriate regulation could unintentionally undermine social justice goals. Academic freedom has the potential to serve as both a liberating and constraining tool, while also acting as a force that can both heal and harm. Specifically, this concept mirrors the ancient Greek ritual practice of pharmakon, which, according to Derrida's (1981) theory, can fulfil both the function of cure and poison. Consequently, we must also be aware of the possibility that uncontrolled academic freedom can easily turn into uncontrollable authority and become what it fights against.

CONCLUSION

We aimed to explore the complicated web of academic freedom, the processes of its erosion and control, its capacity to be subverted and reclaimed, and the paradoxes that exist within academic freedom. We reviewed the literature on academic freedom and critiqued the discourse on academic freedom through a tripartite theoretical framework (Foucault, Marcuse and Smith). First, we discovered that freedom and control are dialectically related and mutually interwoven because it is through this process that freedom can create liberation and oppressions can be reinforced simultaneously. Second, academic freedom is a concept with an intersectional nature of restriction. Third, resistance is possible by creating alternative spaces reminiscent of

Foucault's notion of "heterotopias" (Foucault 2008). Fourthly, decolonisation is epistemic disobedience. Thus, there are repressive regimes and positive freedoms regarding academic freedom. We should be cognisant of the boundaries and the potential of reclamation of academic freedom in higher education.

This brings us to the dialogical form we have adopted as the organisational trope for the study. It is a deliberate attempt at a type of subversion and reclamation of the one-way dialogical nature of academic discourse as a mode of re-inscribing hegemonic power relations. The reclamation lies in the juxtaposition of the authors and their differing locations within North or South. It is also an attempt at a rigorous interrogation of the idea of academic freedom, with a view to discerning universal principles as well as context-specific challenges and possibilities. It exemplifies academic freedom as a contested concept. This, in a nutshell, is what we mean by the academic freedom that we are defending, an ideal in itself, perpetually contested and enacted through practical activity: an unfinished freedom. Above all else, this academic freedom has the hallmarks of theoretical positioning and counter-positionality, and of an incipient need for its contextualisation, not so much as a precaution against its misuse, but to recognise at the same time both the necessity for its protection and its potential for transgression.

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