3 Constructions of Knowledge

> For the defense of academic freedom, it makes a great difference how knowledge production is metaphorically understood.
>
> (Kivisto and Pihlstrom, 2017, p. 791)

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, constructions and contestations of academic freedom were examined from a transnational perspective, reflecting the transnational reality of contemporary knowledge production and the need to consider academic freedom beyond the dominant methodologically nationalist frame. Discourses of 'expertise', politics and affect of knowledge production, interdisciplinarity, ethics, and temporal and geographical positionality were elucidated drawing on the empirical data from Lebanon, the UAE, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This chapter examines the various contested constructions of knowledge within and across the different geographical contexts and by discipline, and the implications of these constructions for pedagogy, research, and understanding of academic freedom. There are different ways of conceiving knowledge: on the one hand, it can be seen as something separate from those who produce it – as something that can be accumulated and describing reality. Alternatively, it can be conceived in more subjective terms, as something that is constructed, negotiated, and embedded in geographical and historical contexts, and in relationships of power. The first model would conceive of teaching predominantly in a transmission model, whereas the second model would conceive of a more interrelational

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

and interpretative model, where teachers and students work together in producing knowledge. Drawing on the empirical data, the chapter interrogates how constructions of knowledge, pedagogy, research, and academic freedom are inextricably connected.

3.2 CONSTRUCTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

Theories of knowledge can be conceived as 'filters' through which we navigate the world and its ideals (Sadiki, 2015). Whilst Kant invokes rationality, Hume links knowledge to 'sensitivity'; in contrast, Muslim conceptions of knowledge can be conceived of as a synthesis between the two, entailing both science and religious belief: 'neither a priori (Kant) or a posteriori (Hume)' (Sadiki, 2015, p. 708). It is increasingly being recognised that there is a plurality of knowledges both within intellectual traditions and across different geographical contexts, with contemporary movements to 'decolonise' and contextualise knowledge.

Contemporary Western constructions of knowledge have been heavily influenced by the Humboldtian tradition, where the Humboldtian model of higher education in the early nineteenth century saw teaching as embedded in research – in effect, that it was, in fact, carried out through research. In this model, teachers and students work together constructing ideas and knowledge, where teaching was conceived as being embedded in research or 'learning in research' – the translation of Humboldt's central idea (Elton, 2005, p. 111). In this model, there is an expectation that students engage with teachers in the joint production of knowledge, with a teaching objective that students actively participate in the inquiry within the discipline (Robertson, 2007). Here, knowledge is viewed more subjectively, as a product of interpretation and negotiation, and influenced by geographical and temporal contexts. In contrast, traditional models of knowledge construe entry into a disciplinary field via a codified body of knowledge and methods. In this model, knowledge is objectively externalised, and hence learners are not conceived of as engaged in the construction of this knowledge. Knowledge is therefore understood as scientific, literal, non-metaphorical, separate, and unrelated to the human mind. In such a model, learners come to conceive of such knowledge as objectively true and corresponding to a description of an existing reality in the world (Brew, 2003), rather than perceiving knowledge to be contested or constructed.

Throughout history, knowledge production has been framed through metaphors (Kivisto and Pihlstrom, 2017). The metaphor of uncertainty can

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

be seen in the Humboldtian model, which also recognises the value-laden nature of knowledge, in contrast to the traditional model where meaning is relatively objective, 'true', and fixed. The Humboldtian model, therefore, constructs the learner as a partner within the academic community, as opposed to an infantilised or second-class citizen. Notions of the 'purposes' of knowledge as a source for social and political change, invoking a metaphor of flux and change; knowledge as discovering the truth, invoking a metaphor of perseveration and stability; and knowledge for instrumental and economic benefits of society in a market perspective, invoking the metaphor of 'capital' and 'knowledge economy', will all be explored later in the chapter relating to contestations with interdisciplinarity. As such, the 'discipline' is an important construct, mediating the research–teaching relationship, and the conception of knowledge itself. Furthermore, metaphors of horizontality and verticality, corresponding to breadth and depth, are invoked in discourses of interdisciplinarity.

3.2.1 The Value of Education

Conceptions of the nature of 'knowledge' necessarily invoke particular notions of who the knowledge is for and what it aims to achieve. The metaphor of capital with respect to knowledge is clearly evident in the following excerpt on the 'value' of education, linked directly to employment outcomes:

> Well, as I'm sure you know, there is a big debate now about the value of education, I mean, **literally the value** . . . especially in the US . . . And now funding agencies, funders, including parents and students who borrow money to pay for their education, I mean, they are also thinking in terms of, when they think of value and they think of **employability**. (Professor of History, branch campus in Gulf State, p. 1)

Similarly, the concept of 'enterpreneurship', 'marketability', and 'skills' is invoked in the following excerpt of the state of academia in the US context:

> So even students who are majoring in Liberal Arts are encouraged to see themselves as entrepreneurs . . . no one cares about having them read Noville or Homer. It's learning how to write on a white board. You know learn how to be a communication facilitator, learn how to use social media, so it's an increased emphasis on alleged skill building that will be marketable, immediately marketable. (Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, University of New Hampshire, US, p. 6)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

Knowledge and skills are contrasted in the above account, where skills are in effect a form of capital that can literally be cashed in for a financial return. Whilst academia overall is affected in this regard, humanities and the social sciences are particularly affected, linked again to notions of capital and translating that learning 'capital' to literal capital through employability. Conceptions of the 'knowledge economy' have gained significant prominence in policy planning for the global economy since the 2000s, construed as a factor in production and global competition. In the Gulf States, and specifically the UAE, there is a dominant discourse and policy planning to transition from being oil-dependent states to knowledge-based economies (Hvidt, 2021). There is further impetus for this transition with global efforts to address climate change and shifting to greener sources of energy, reflected by the UAE's hosting of the sixth annual knowledge summit in November 2019, entitled 'Knowledge: The Path to Sustainable Development' (Amin, 2020) and COP28 in 2023. The UAE has also invested in space technologies and has built Masdar City, one of the world's most sustainable Urban communities, built on a philosophy of 'economic, social, and environmental sustainability' (Masdar, 2022). Higher education is presented as key to the strategic vision of achieving a knowledge-based economy that is globally competitive.

Whilst a global trend, the status of humanities and the social sciences in the Arab region is considered particularly bleak. Although the most competitive universities in the Arab region require some general education requirements including social science and humanities courses, 'this is not the case in the vast majority [of universities] of the Arab World', 'with less investment, there is less production . . . the numbers are . . . quite dismal' (Professor of History, branch campus in Gulf State, p. 2). The emphasis in the Gulf States, as in the Arab World on professional degrees, is reflected in the programme offerings and specialisms of branch campuses in Dubai. Commenting on the course offerings of the University of Birmingham in Dubai: 'That'll be linked to what they perceive as the market demand. I think there's certain subjects that they would not take to Dubai' (UCU branch officer, UK, p. 5).

Discourses of real-world applicability illustrate the contested nature of knowledge and its links to policymaking and business. Peter Singer, Professor in Philosophy, comments on the nature of scholarship in the discipline of Philosophy, positioning himself as

> I was always interested in questions that had some real world significance, you know, there's a lot of intellectual interest in trying to show that I know that I'm not dreaming now but in practical terms it does not make a lot of difference to

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

> most people's lives, although questions in ethics obviously do, especially if you get to applied ethics or practical ethics and that's perhaps why I was interested in that. (p. 1)

Similarly, a critique of research conducted on the Global South by Global North researchers and, in particular, those theorising sociological critiques of development research advocate real-world applicability:

> I feel like there is a lot of this ivory tower research that examines the natives and is critical of development interventions and whatever else that we do and we kind of glibly say, and I just do not feel like that's added a lot of value. By the way that we write that is very theoretically, that is very complex, it's really abstract, does not lend itself well to knowledge that is shared. I have a very low tolerance for that kind of stuff. So I'm a little bit protective of the space and the time and the purpose of the research that we do, as much as I can control. (Director of Arab Institute for Women in Lebanon, p. 9)

This account alludes to the theory/empirical data hierarchy that dominates knowledge production, also raised in the UK context by a Professor of Education, critiquing the state of sociology of race several decades ago as 'theorising was all from an armchair, so some people would argue that it was to do with kind of deficient culture or family structure, some people would argue that it was to do with racism, but there was almost nothing actually inside a school to say "what does this look like inside a school?"' (Professor of Education, University of Birmingham, UK, p. 2). Also invoking the positionality of social class, he reflects that his background was significant in perceptions of his own work: 'He works hard, he's a good ethnographer, but he does not do theory' (p. 5).

Constructs of 'impact', 'concreteness', and 'implementability' are also considered in relation to discussions of real-world impact. Commenting on research in the field of gender and development:

> So are you asking questions that have a direct impact on people's lives? And is it very clear? You know we ask a lot of fluffy questions. Is it clear that these questions are going to give you answers that are concrete, that you can then turn into something that you might implement? (Director of Arab Institute for Women in Lebanon, p. 9)

This conception of external knowledge to be discovered has its value defined in terms of evidence of effect in the relative short term. This reflects contemporary national and global debates on the interrelationship between research,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

policy, and practice. In the field of education, for example, funding for systematic reviews can be linked to the impact agenda and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK context, which illustrates the validation of certain forms of research as directly 'useful' for end users – whether policymakers, practitioners, or local populations. Conceptions of knowledge transfer and public engagement also illustrate policy initiatives prioritising the importance of the direct application of research to the various 'publics' and its role in promoting the economy (notion of 'knowledge economy'). In addition, it has also invoked debates relating to methodology and quality of research. In the UK context, the rise in systematic reviews in education arose in the context of critiques from policymakers (as well as some academics' criticisms, e.g. Hargreaves and Tooley[1]) regarding the quality of educational research and its perceived relevance to the concerns of policymakers, practitioners, and so-called end users of education. Concerns were expressed about academics being detached from the everyday realities of educational practice, with a call to make research more relevant and its production more democratic[2]. Systematic reviews in education have drawn on approaches to synthesising research evidence from the field of health promotion. The Cochrane Collaboration was established over two decades ago and is a well-known network of researchers, professionals, and other interested 'end users' who conduct systematic reviews with the aim of gathering evidence to make informed decisions in the field of health promotion. This approach provided a model for developments in education; the Campbell Collaboration is an international education network conducting systematic reviews on the impact of educational interventions.

Proponents of systematic reviews argue that they reduce bias, are replicable, and provide a more reliable evidence base upon which decisions are made in policy or practice (Oakley, 2003). In addition, they can identify gaps in the research. However, there has been considerable criticism of systematic reviews in education. In part, some of these concerns are based on concerns with regard to the methodology. Although systemic reviews (SRs) in education purport to engage with a range of research questions and both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, critics argue that SRs are, nevertheless, underpinned by positivist epistemological assumptions about the nature of

[1] Press release for Tooley's 1998 Report 'Majority of Academic Educational Research Is Second-Rate'.
[2] The EPPI-Centre at the Institute of Education, where I worked from 2000 to 2006, was set up in 2000 by the then Department for Education and Skills to lead on methodological developments in systematic reviews in education and to train academic researchers in a range of topics in education to conduct systematic reviews in these areas.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

knowledge and research, linked to long-standing debates or 'paradigm wars' between qualitative and quantitative approaches and their epistemological differences. Other institutional/structural concerns have also been raised, for example, by Thomas and Pring (2003), Hammersley (2001), MacLure (2005), and others pertaining to the issue of the relationship between research, policymaking, and practice, with concerns expressed over the central role the government has increasingly played in setting the research agenda. There are very practical implications for research as a consequence of the state's allocation of research funding in education, and by implication for academic freedom. Such initiatives narrow what is considered to be 'acceptable' research (MacLure, 2005), leaving little space for 'blue skies' research and 'thinking the unthinkable'. Further, the emphasis on clarity in the methodological process is arguably not only a technical issue but also a political one, which entails the regulation of practices in less powerful communities (Giroux, 1992).

3.2.2 Positionality, Activism, and Public Knowledge

Western constructions of knowledge have been critiqued for not taking critical account of what 'knowledge' denotes, the politics of knowledge, and the structural conditions within higher education (Weiler, 2009). In Western discourses, rationality is associated with the pursuit of knowledge, which is gendered and raced, deriving from Enlightenment theories of natural rights, where women were seen as irrational and denied rights on that basis; similarly, colonial and orientalist discourses have typically constructed their colonial subjects as lacking rationality and by extension – conceived to be less human (Said, 1978). Similarly, Fricker (2009)'s concept of testimonial injustice is used to describe certain groups having less credibility as producers of knowledge, resulting in them being 'silenced'. Conversely, emotions have been constructed as both 'primitive' and 'feminine', set up in contrast to rationality. As discussed in the previous chapter, emotion can be conceived as a social and political practice, rather than understood solely as an individual psychological response (Ahmed, 2014). Studying social movements provides an illustration of the active production of knowledge beyond the academy, which can include cultural production, social media, and political cartoons, for example (Kiwan, 2017a).

The positionality of knowledge producers is contested in debates on knowledge production in the academy, where knowledge for social change through activism is critiqued by those defending the idea of a traditional

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

canon and disciplines: 'Often public knowledge is discredited because it's not expressed in certain academic terms' (Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Leicester, UK, p. 6). Describing the establishment of Faculty United at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, a Professor of Psychology reflects on his activist role in the establishment of the body that acts as a union for university faculty and its relationship to his academic work:

> Faculty United came to be in the first place as a reaction by some Faculty, by a number of small group of Faculty towards administrative decisions that were taking place that were unilateral without consultation with Faculty members and did not engage us. And it's tied to my work in discipline because I'm very much interested in group dynamics and conflict and obedience and hierarchy and collective action is also part of what I'm doing. And I'm involved in affairs related to Palestinian issues and so on and so forth. So that kind of activism is part of my personal life, my academic life and my professional life at AUB. (Professor of Psychology, American University of Beirut, p. 2)

Examples of initiatives for public knowledge both within and outside the academy across the different geographic contexts include the US Lesbian 'Herstory', the online, independent e-zine 'Jadaliya' providing critical analysis on the Middle East, the feminist journal 'Kohl' produced in Beirut, Lebanon, and the UK-based centre at University College London on the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership. The Lesbian Herstory was started in 1974 as part of the gay liberation movement, with the aim to produce an accessible archive of lesbian lives, and is now the largest collection globally. In the Lebanese context, a trilingual (English/Arabic/ French) gender studies journal was established in 2014, which is independent of a higher education institutional setting and works as a transnational feminist collective, funded by the Heinrich Ball Foundation. It is positioned as both academic and activist, with submissions from across the Middle East region and also from those in the Global North whose work relates to the Middle East region. The UK-based research centre on the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership is characterised as having impact in terms of a contribution to public history. However, the aim is that this would be a contribution to public history through museums and cultural institutions, rather than solely in academic terms. In discussing how this work relates to the reparations movement, the approach is characterised as objectively collecting empirical data, and not becoming involved in seeking reparations. This construction of knowledge also has implications for the understanding of the nature of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

'evidence' and history as a discipline, which will be returned to later in the chapter. The issue of positionality is examined in more depth in the following section on the decolonisation of knowledge.

3.3 DECOLONISATION OF KNOWLEDGE

'Decolonisation', although a contested term, can be seen to have two key components: firstly, 'a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire, and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study', and secondly, 'to offer alternative ways of thinking' (Bhambra et al., 2018, p. 2). This necessarily brings positionality to the fore, acknowledging the temporal and spatial situatedness of knowledge. There is also an emphasis on change, both with respect to teaching and research. According to Mignolo (2010, p. 342):

> Decolonial theory makes a louder and more radical challenge, linked more directly to protest and direct confrontations with existing practice. Decolonial theory is focused on an epistemic challenge to colonialist thinking, with an emphasis on radical delinking from the sources of ongoing inequalities that have deep historical roots in European imperialism, but that are continually re-staged and re-routed through the continuing and deepening inequalities brought about through neoliberalism, including in the neoliberal university system.

This section interrogates the role of politics, dissent, and affect in knowledge production and its methodologies, whilst the university as a key site of this struggle will be the focus of the following chapter.

The British anthropologist, Mary Douglas, in 1975 is noted for claiming that: 'The colonisation of each other's minds is the price we pay for thought'[3]. Reflecting on growing up in the Caribbean, a UK-based Emeritus Professor of Sociology comments:

> They took away everything else. So this is the idea of the Mimic Man, you have to erase all sense of yourself and then implant the view of the coloniser. You become totally colonised. So it's that – you know the Canon just is not simply white men's books. It's about mind control. (Emeritus Professor of Sociology, UK, p. 12)

[3] *The New York Times*, 22 May 2007, front page; quoting the British anthropologist Mary Douglas on the occasion of her death on 16 May 2007.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

Some of the more radical theories of 'colonising the mind' (Dascal, 2007) pre-close the notion of an exchange of ideas, tending to construct power as a finite resource positioned from above between the 'powerful' and the 'powerless'. In addition, it assumes a regionally if not methodologically nationalist approach to knowledge production; implicit in such theorisations is a notion of the 'purity' of a culture and its ideas, which does not account for the complexities of knowledge production, transfer, and legitimisation (Kiwan, 2017a). Whilst the Mary Douglas quote could be interpreted as an apologia for the colonisation of knowledge, the production of knowledge can be understood beyond, or through, the polemical binaries of colonial or decolonial knowledges. More radical approaches do not recognise more Foucauldian understandings of power as relational, contested, and contextualised, nor do they recognise different forms of agency in how knowledge is used, produced, and reconstructed (Kiwan, 2017a). Indeed, Connell (2014) notes that in the field of gender, some of the most creative work in the South arises from the 'critical appropriation of Northern ideas, in combination with ideas that come from radically different experiences' (p. 527).

This is not to be ahistorical or ignore differentials in power, but rather to recognise the dynamic elasticity of knowledge, its incrementality, and its relationality; that it is dialogical, plural, and unbounded; and that it is transformed, owned, and embodied in different sites, recognising the agency or those deemed to be the recipients or colonised by such knowledge. This contextualisation can be conceived of as being 'embodied' in that people live it as an experience and in relation to others. This has an unpredictability about it as knowledge is constructed, contested, reconstructed, and transformed. Indeed, Nandy (2014) distinguishes between hegemony and dominance, where hegemony is more dangerous as it is the internalisation of the coloniser's categories. However, he, nevertheless, acknowledges that 'no hegemony is complete unless it can specify, monitor or control the conventions of dissent and resistance to hegemony' (Nandy, 2014, p. 1). This tension between the internalisation of the coloniser's categories and the fluidity unpredictability and dissent in engaging with knowledge is clearly evident in the above account. In a similar vein, Homi Bhabha makes the case that 'liminality' also empowers, enabling a capacity of resistance and re-narration (Bhabha, 1994). The fluidity and relational nature of 'power' is evident, where power relations unfold in all social relations, including the production of knowledge, rather than solely being conceived in terms of a finite resource from above (Foucault, 1991).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

This resistance takes a variety of forms, with complaint and early retirement in one account explained as a form of resistance to institutional structures, invoking Ahmed's work on refusal and complaint:

> And the system is somehow neutral and open and yet you have got all these difficult, complaining students who do not know any better, and how they are threats to the sanctity of what real good knowledge is, what real you know, the right kind of knowledge. How dissent is gobbled up and repackaged as now the difficult and complaining students. (Emeritus Professor of Sociology, p. 9)

The institutional setting of the university within which such complaint and refusals are made is explored in the following chapter, which focuses on the university.

Academic freedom is critiqued as a tangential issue: 'So the threat to academic freedom, it's such a boring thing you know. Sorry. Because what's at stake is much, much bigger' (p. 12). Whilst there is a drive for resistance and the production of new knowledge, there is concomitantly the sense of powerlessness and frustration:

> They're kind of toying round the edges when what we are really talking about, entrenchments of structures and systems of thinking and feeling and knowledge, that keep us second rate, make us nobodies you know. The human spirit is so great and our will to survive and to struggle is that we have taken that, that we have been given and turn it into something else for ourselves and have re-appropriated that knowledge and those ideas and made new things out of them. (Emeritus Professor of Sociology, UK, p. 12)

Expressed here is a frustration at a perceived lack of social change. Contested constructions of social change include functionalist approaches which see change as necessary and desirable as long as it is gradual over time, largely in order to preserve the status quo. In contrast, conflict theory conceives of social change as arising from social inequality and that protest is desirable and necessary in order to achieve social change. Social change can be broadly conceived in terms of both the notion of structure, including social, legal, and political institutions, and the ways of living and thinking as reflected in language, beliefs, values, customs, and lived practices (Kiwan, 2017a); my previous research on social movements has highlighted activist constructions of social change as a process, noting the temporal nature as opposed to a more static framing focused on outcome in a moment of time. When social change is viewed as process, it can be seen as 'a way of living', where social change and knowledge

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

production are mutually constitutive of one another as socio-temporal processes.

The process of 're-appropriation' of knowledge and the making of something 'new' are also raised by Baden Offord, Professor of Cultural Studies and Human Rights, Curtin University, Australia, who, referring to the post-colonial scholar, Nandy, describes the production of knowledge as 'being basically a Western template' dictating 'what kind of knowledge, what knowledge is for' (pp. 11–12), and that 'knowledge that's produced through that Western model is very exploitative'. Commenting on the practice of Western scholars researching the 'other' in minority communities, or outside the West, he raises the ethical issue of over-researched communities. In the UK context, a Professor of Education describes his emerging awareness as a Ph.D. student of the ethical issues of White researchers researching Black communities: 'My crisis was the . . . my interactions with the field, that as a white researcher am I reproducing this pattern of building a career but making no difference to the people that I claim to be wanting to help' (p. 4). The politics of knowledge production where 'actually members of the oppressor class are taken more seriously as witnesses to oppression . . . where the fact that I'm white has meant that I've been able to say things that I might not have got away with at that time if I was a minoritised scholar' (p. 4), illustrating the 'testimonial injustice' (Fricker, 2009) of greater credibility as a White male academic researching race. This positionality with respect to the production of knowledge is further examined in the following section.

3.4 TEMPORAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL POSITIONALITY

The Western hegemony of knowledge and its production have been increasingly challenged over the last several decades from all over the world as well as from within the Global North (e.g. Bhabha, Bhambra, Dallal, Foucault, Hanafi, Mignolo, Mirza, Nandy, and Spivak). The central idea that temporal and geographical contextualisation is necessary in situating knowledge and its production is a dominant assertion. In addition, Nandy calls for the rejection of a synchronic model, and in its place a diachronic model, challenging the premise of European colonisers that the 'developing world' was moving towards the same destination as the 'developed world' albeit at a slower rate, whereby 'colonialism became a pedagogic mission . . . with the colonisers bearing the burden of a civilising mission' (Nandy and Darby, 2018, p. 280).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

The notion that 'all social imaginaries present blind spots owing to their inherent socio-centrism' (Sadiki, 2015, p. 704) challenges the assumed universalism and abstract neutrality of the 'Western Canon', as well as its forms of knowledge production. Commenting on the use of the term 'orient', Sadiki (2015, p. 717) asserts that this constructed 'other' provides a means to illustrate 'what the "West" is and is not. In such images, the "non-West" is marginal to rationality, peripheral to theory and on the sidelines of knowledge-making'. This section illustrates the temporal and geographical positionality of knowledge production and its transnational nature. This is further developed through an interrogation of discourses of interdisciplinarity in the following section.

Recognising the temporal and geographical situatedness of knowledge logically necessitates that academic freedom is similarly situated in space and time: 'I do think academic freedom exists and you know, it exists at the moment people act it out. It does not exist in a vacuum . . . I do think that there are different pressures in different places' (former Professor of History, American University of Beirut, p. 2). Further, the moralising frame of the perceived lack of academic freedom in only some parts of the world is highlighted in several accounts: 'its not like these are bad countries and these are the good countries, but for me that's two sides of the same coin' (Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Leicester, UK, p. 2). The metaphor of the coin implicitly carries with it the notion of mutuality and interconnectedness, an idea developed further in her account on the nature of the contemporary legacy of colonialism effecting knowledge production through institutional mechanisms such as funding. Echoing the concern with a moralising critique of academic freedom outside the West, the role of branch campuses in relation to academic freedom in the Gulf States is contextualised: 'I do not have a moralising sort of answer for you, you know, whether I think that they are good or bad. They're there and they are doing certain things' (Associate Professor of Anthropology, US, pp. 7–8).

The geographical positionality of academic freedom can be clearly witnessed in the accounts, where the production of certain areas of knowledge have differential political and ethical values ascribed to them. Zachary Lockman, Professor of Middle East History, New York University, dryly notes that there was a time in the United States where one would not even mention 'Palestine in polite company' (p. 2), whilst another in the UK context comments that it is 'a taboo area' (Professor of Sociology, UK, p. 10).

Several accounts of those conducting research related to Palestine and the Middle East in the US and UK contexts refer to constraints on their academic

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

freedom and a hostile working environment: 'Within the American Academy when it comes to Israel/Palestine, my resounding answer is, no there is not really academic freedom when it comes to this issue' (Matthew Abraham, Professor of English, University of Arizona, US). Matthew, the author of *Out of Bounds: Academic Freedom and the Question of Palestine*, details how throughout his career he has received warnings and 'even veiled threats to stop writing on these issues, and that I would not get a job or would be denied tenure, or would not be able to get key grants to support my research. I've lost grants before, after they were guaranteed to me in writing under the cover of bureaucratic error' (p. 2). Yet, Abraham reflects on his own positionality, noting that: 'I think I was, kind of immunised in my written work because my last name is Abraham and a name like Matthew Abraham, people assume I'm Jewish when in fact my parents are originally from Kerala in India. But people when they would actually meet me, they would assume I'm Palestinian' (p. 8).

The contrast in researching Palestine in the United States compared to in Beirut, Lebanon, illustrates the geopolitical situatedness of the production of knowledge and its implications for academic freedom. Alex Lubin, Professor in American Studies at the University of New Mexico and former Director of the Centre for American Studies and Research (CASAR), comments on his experience of teaching and researching on the United States and its geopolitical relationship to Israel and Palestine:

> Well I think that it [AUB, Beirut, Lebanon] was a far more open place to study, write about, lecture. In the United States, it was impossible, at least when I went to Beirut in two thousand and eleven, it was still very difficult in the US to engage those conversations without being accused of being antisemitic frankly. And Beirut and AUB was for me – and I specify that it was specifically for me because I know it's not for everybody – it was a very open place to engage in the kinds of research that I was doing. And to think about the question of Palestine in the US in a very different way. (p. 6)

Lubin further contextualises the study of Palestine within the United States: 'I would also say that New Mexico, it's a state with a relatively small Jewish population, and without well organised Israel-supporting Jewish communities. If I were engaged in my work in New York or in parts of California, I think that I would probably come under much more attack' (p. 4).

Furthermore, Lubin also invokes the positionality of the individual researcher, as in Matthew Abraham's account above, with respect to academic freedom in both the US and Lebanese contexts. He also reflects on his

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

academic experience of conducting research on Palestine in the United States compared to others with different positionalities in the academy:

> So for example at the University of New Mexico, another area that I would also mention is that I'm on a list, as many scholars are, that's compiled by Canary Mission which is a secret group. And I have a pretty ugly biography there. And I think that those things have great impact on scholars without tenure. They have great impact on graduate students and junior faculty who are not White and they have greater impact on faculty who are not Jewish, at least in the context of the Israel/Palestine issue. (p. 4)

Whilst in the Lebanese context, he also reflects how the production of his knowledge carried greater credibility:

> Now I think that I was afforded a certain amount of freedom to engage in that scholarship in part because I was a white, Jewish American. The administration saw me as maybe a more legitimate interlocutor on the question than had I been a Palestinian American scholar ... I never felt that they limited my academic freedom in any way. (p. 6)

The relativity of academic freedom in the UK context also refers to the issue of researching or speaking on Palestine/Israel, perceiving this to be the most controversial field. A UK Lecturer identifies the three most challenging areas to conduct research in the United Kingdom as Palestine/Israel, Whiteness, and masculinity and reflects on the nature of the containment of producing knowledge in these fields:

> They're three things that worry me greatly. And I do not hold back from criticising them, I do criticise them, but I am cautious when I do in a way that I'm generally not cautious about other things. So the fear that I may be accused of being anti-Semitic, sexist towards men – as if that even exists – and, you know, racist towards White people – again as if that actually exists. So it's charges of a moral wrong which is in fact the very moral wrong that I am committing my work to challenging. So in all three cases, you know, that's what's going on. So I would always argue that reverse racism and sexism are fictions and so I think that though I worry about being charged with those things, I feel that they aren't real and I can easily argue for that, if need be, not that everybody would come on-board. Whereas anti-Semitism is real, you know, and is a really worrying serious thing. And so I think that would feel particularly difficult as a charge to deal with compared with the other two. There's obviously a huge context around this in the UK at the moment and just in the Western world generally, so yeah. (pp. 5–6)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

Researching Palestine/Israel is a highly emotive field, and the containment and sanctions for those researching in this field are similarly through the emotional *practice* of levelling an accusation of committing a 'moral wrong'. This central role of affect in the politics of knowledge production has been overlooked, in terms of both its production and policing or 'governmentality' of its production. There is the moral discourse of policing the boundaries of academic freedom forming the basis of practical sanctions referred to, such as surveillance and threats, loss of livelihood and earnings, loss of intellectual reputation, and even criminal proceedings.

The geopolitical situatedness of academic freedom is also commented on in the context of the UAE. According to a University and College Union branch officer in the United Kingdom discussing course content at branch campuses on Dubai:

> There are certain subjects, particularly in the humanities, in politics, that they know full well if they took them to Dubai they'd just be outraged because they'd have to completely rewrite the syllabus, the staff would be very against it . . . I mean if an academic were to go over to Dubai and be on Panopto and start talking about . . . you know . . . anything that could be illegal, so it's quite serious. (UCU branch officer, UK university, p. 5)

Whilst academics with the experience of teaching in branch and local universities in the UAE state that they have had freedom to develop their own courses which are not screened or censored by local authorities, the above account focuses on possible legal implications, where power is conceptualised in a unitary way as held from above as opposed to relationally. Given the seriousness of possible sanctions, this construction of power is understandable, especially given the role and responsibility of a university union in protecting staff. Yet, there is ambiguity with respect to branch campuses, given that the law of land takes priority, and there is a discourse of responsibility being with the academic to comply with the local law: 'So it's sort of like "Nothing to do with us". The complicating factor is that they also have to comply with UK law and they also have to comply with EU law. One of the things they did not think through is the intersection between those three legal frameworks' (p. 10), illustrating the transnational and intersecting nature of the law and its implications for academic freedom and the production of knowledge, which is ambiguous and unresolved. This legal conundrum is also evident in the Lebanese context where academic freedom is curtailed where academics at the American University of Beirut can no longer conduct research on those who are on the US terrorist list:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

> And the number of organisations that are put on the terrorist list by the US who happen to be in our region are tremendous – they have Palestinian organisations on the terrorist list, they have Syria's Government on the terrorist list, they have Iran, they have Hezbollah and half the Lebanese population – what am I supposed to do, stop doing research? . . . So this is Trump now and his bigotry. What if he says tomorrow 'well Muslims are terrorists and you cannot talk to them' – what are we going to do? (Professor of Psychology, AUB, Lebanon, p. 13)

The comparative and transnational perspective on knowledge production and academic freedom raises the question of whether there is a qualitative difference in academic freedom between the different geographical contexts in the West compared to the Gulf States and the broader Middle East region. A US Professor with experience of teaching in the Gulf asserts that universally, one 'learns the codes of the place', yet 'it becomes censorship in certain contexts, and other contexts, business as usual' (p. 3). It raises the question of whether democracy is a prerequisite for academic freedom, as Sadiki (2015, p. 703) astutely points out that 'the control of knowledge production and practices is one omission in most definitions of authoritarian structures of power'. The accounts from academics in the different geopolitical contexts of Lebanon, the UAE, the United Kingdom, and the United States illustrate the boundedness of academic freedom, indicating a continuum with geopolitical red lines in the different contexts. What differs is the degree of severity of sanctions and the discourses within which these are embedded. In the UK and US contexts, a morally imbued discourse is weaponised to regulate knowledge production coupled with self-censorship and the fear of loss of employment. Morally imbued discourses are also used to regulate knowledge production in the UAE and Lebanon around various topics, which may also be framed in relation to a religious framework, in relation to topics including gender and sexuality, national identity, and security. Rather than a qualitative difference, the different modes of state governance – authoritarian compared to democratic apply quantitatively more severe sanctions, which can include imprisonment or being denied entry to the country.

3.5 INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Throughout the twentieth century, it has largely been taken for granted that the production of knowledge is organised through academic disciplines. The contestation around disciplinarity is underpinned by conceptions of knowledge and 'truth', as discussed earlier in the chapter. Contesting discourses of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

various disciplines emerge in the interviewee accounts; for example, the discipline of History is constructed as 'relentlessly empirical' (Professor of History, UK) in one account, with confidence in the objectivity of this evidence corresponding to the truth if challenged. Yet, it has been argued that history in effect is a meeting of the past and the future at a moment in time when the archive is read and is understood within the discourses and understandings of the present – challenging the notion that 'history is a slave to the archives and it has no place for human emotions and human subjectivities, as the aim is to exile subjectivity from history' (Nandy and Darby, 2018, p. 284). Another account challenges both the methods of the discipline and its traditionally accepted content. Beth Baron, Professor of History, City College and Graduate Center, CUNY, NY, US, traces her intellectual development in the field of women's history reflecting:

> My first works were on women intellectuals at a time when I actually did not even use the word 'intellectual'. I mean I did not even think that women could be intellectuals or Middle East women could be intellectuals, I mean women anywhere. I mean I just, you know one associated men with intellectuals, women produced journals and wrote and so on. (p. 1)

Not only was there an absence with regard to the history of women, but there was also an absence of the concept of women as producers of knowledge, corresponding to Fricker's (2009) concept of 'hermeneutic injustice', where inequalities in power can constrain certain groups from understanding their own lived experiences. Drawing on Marx, Fricker (2009) comments that those with less power or who are marginalised live in a society structured for those in power, and collective social understandings and identities are influenced accordingly.

In the discipline of Sociology, a Professor of Sociology in the United Kingdom charts the changes in the discipline where it has become more 'applied', arguably a 'hermeneutic injustice' (Fricker, 2009), in response to institutional demands of illustrating 'impact' in the Research Evaluation Framework exercise for university government funding. He also notes the rise in interest in 'behavioural science':

> If you wish to improve pupil performance of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, so a standard sociological approach might say well it's a consequence of inequality so you address poverty, you address inequality and that will improve pupil performance, but there is no interest in doing anything about poverty or inequality so it's given inequality, given poverty, how do we improve pupil

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

> performance. And that becomes the behavioural rather than the social structural emphasis. And I think that overall is a disadvantage for sociology. (pp. 4–5)

A review of impact case studies submitted to the 2014 REF in Sociology did not include 'one impact case study in sociology which addressed what conventional sociologists would regard as a critical or social justice topic' (p. 5). With a shift in Sociology towards applied social studies, more sociologists submit to the Social policy REF panel. He suggests that this is linked to interdisciplinarity where 'the nature of the work in that area becomes less sociological, so people start describing themselves as working on a particular applied topic' (p. 5), such as education or health.

3.5.1 'Disciplinary Decadence' and the Rise of Interdisciplinarity

It has been argued that the defense of disciplines results in their reification, and its contents and methods overshadow the production of knowledge so that, in effect, the 'discipline becomes the world' (Gordon, 2014, p. 86). Gordon (2014) refers to this as disciplinary decadence where the 'discipline turns into itself and implodes' (p. 86), and each discipline takes a standpoint of assessing and rejecting all other disciplines. He argues that this also occurs at the level of method. He describes the 'teleological suspensions of disciplines' as 'epistemic decolonial acts' (p. 87) and the response of interdisciplinarity.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, new ways of organising knowledge across disciplinary boundaries – including, for example, gender studies, cultural studies, and post-colonial studies – challenged the assumed 'naturalness' of the disciplines. Yet, arguably, interdisciplinary fields of study themselves have come to replicate features of disciplines in terms of defined institutional homes in higher education and their own methods of policing method and content (Williams, 2016). Those decrying a perceived demise of the disciplines and the accepted Canon argue that interdisciplinarity is a rejection of knowledge, where 'knowledge as intrinsically valuable carries little legitimacy today' (Williams, 2016, p. 120). This view is based on the epistemological position that knowledge is objective, rather than geographically or temporally situated and corresponds to an external truth. As such, Williams (2016) laments the politicisation and instrumentalisation of knowledge, describing this as the 'end of knowledge'. In this logic, to defend the disciplines is a defense of truth and the means to achieve academic freedom. Whilst academic disciplines continue to evolve and are not static, critiques of interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge production argue that the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

discipline represents an accepted canon of universally recognised work in the field, with validated methods available as a framework from which to evaluate and critique work in the given area. Rational objectivity in empirically knowing the 'truth' is implicated. The unquestioned acceptance of an objective canon is challenged in a number of accounts, explicitly expressed by a Professor of Sociology in the United Kingdom: 'But you know what is the Canon? Who invented the Canon and the roots of that Canon are rotten to the core you know. And the thing is, it's like the Canon it's man-made and it's you know, it's historically rooted in racial thought and ideology and about the power' (p. 12).

Interdisciplinarity is also contested, where there are different forms of interdisciplinarity, a form of 'market interdisciplinarity' promoted by higher education institutions and research councils, in contrast to an 'intellectual interdisciplinarity'. One scholar working in the interdisciplinary field of Native American Studies in the United States wryly comments:

> So Women's studies, African American studies, Native American studies . . . in the eyes of the average noble tax payer, not worth our tax dollars because they are not actually teaching students marketable skills, they are only teaching students to complain about the existing political order, which of course is the whole point of an education in the first place. (p. 5)

A Professor of Sociology in the United Kingdom distinguishes between 'critical interdisciplinarity' and 'applied interdisciplinarity', highlighting the marketisation and instrumentalisation of applied interdisciplinarity:

> So critical interdisciplinarity is the kind of engagement that reconstructs disciplines and does so across disciplines. So if I take the example of feminism, say well feminism has an impact upon sociology but it also has an impact upon politics, anthropology and so on. And so you could say that feminism is an interdisciplinary movement that critically reconstructs disciplines. And I think that decolonising the curriculum or decolonising research would be a form of critical interdisciplinarity, performing a similar role to the role that feminism played. However, what people they mean by interdisciplinarity now is some sort of banal notion that oh problems are complex and they need the resources of more than one subject, so they actually become . . . so applied interdisciplinarity is actually conservative in its relation to disciplines and it seeks to amalgamate those disciplines to address social problems but, increasingly, those social problems are identified in a hierarchical fashion, so that applied interdisciplinarity becomes a funder's favoured way of funding separated from the interests of wider populations and groups. (pp. 11–12)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

3.5.2 Geographical Positionality and Disciplinarity

Contemporary research in mobilities of knowledge emphasises the notion of 'negotiation' and 'translation', rather than the 'unproblematic transplanting of ideas, theories and empirical realities from one nation-state . . . to another' (Waters and Leung, 2017, p. 271). There is the social production of new knowledge (Faulconbridge, 2006), rather than place having no relevance – what Morgan (2004, p. 3) has referred to as the 'exaggerated death of geography'. As argued earlier in the chapter, it is important to recognise the embedded and culturally specific nature of knowledge, as well as recognising Foucauldian understandings of power as relational, contested, and contextualised, thus recognising different forms of agency in how knowledge is used, produced, and reconstructed. The example of the interdisciplinary field of American Studies in Lebanon illustrates the importance of geopolitical place in the construction and contestation of these fields.

3.5.2.1 AUB American Studies

The focus of American studies programmes in the Middle East are somewhat different from how the field is constructed in the United States. Despite intended US foreign policy intentions, the discipline has been transformed in its exportation to the Middle East. At the American University of Beirut, in Lebanon, Palestine and Edward Said's work on Palestine has significant import, in contrast to being an 'absent present' in US-based American studies programmes (Darwish, 2010). Alex Lubin, Professor of American Studies, University of Mexico, and former Director of the CASAR at AUB, Lebanon, traces the intellectual development of the field located within a 'transnational' turn, which entails the study of the sociopolitical history of the United States and its global engagements. Patrick McGreevy, Founding Director of CASAR, situates the establishment of CASAR at a time when American Studies was making its transnational turn: '. . . the Middle East was kind of the biggest thorn in the US's relationship with the world outside in the last few decades. So the US and the Middle East became this sort of crucial thing about how you understand the United States' (p. 8). As a consequence, such an approach engages in critiques of government power 'articulated in race and gender and sexuality' (Alex Lubin, p. 2) and has been 'chastised within the United States as "anti-American Studies"' (Alex Lubin, p. 2). Lubin describes the hosting of events at CASAR at the American University of Beirut:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

> Our national association, the American Studies Association you know, would have some panels about that in their conference but it really wasn't at the centre. Whereas the conferences that were hosted by CASAR became these huge events and this is – I'll take some criticism personally for this – but it became an event that was maybe even more important for US-based scholars than it was for scholars across the region. And that's because it opened up an avenue for discourse that was difficult in the United States. (pp. 6–7)

Yet, the role of CASAR at AUB has been contested, with an alternative vision of CASAR as a place 'to tell the story of America' (p. 7), with a concern that CASAR had become 'seen as a place just to be critical of the United States and not as a place producing new knowledge or doing the work of teaching the Lebanese about US culture' (p. 7). This concern has developed over time, and with changes in personnel in administration, Lubin recalls conversations between members of the AUB administration saying that 'CASAR had become too focused on the Palestine question' and 'too homosexual' (p. 7). He describes the mission and work of CASAR as having substantially changed since his time under a different leadership at AUB, with Patrick McGreevey, founding CASAR Director, commenting that the work is 'just focusing on the arts and literature without kind of the sort of social side or the political side' (p. 5).

This shift in position was also evident with regard to the appointment of Stephen Salaita as a visiting professor in the academic year 2015–2016, and the events surrounding his subsequent application for the position of Director of CASAR in 2016, which will be discussed in Chapter 5 on 'restrictions'. Salaita became the centre of a high-profile controversy when the University of Illinois rescinded its offer to him following objections to his tweets that were critical of Israel's bombing of Gaza in 2014. According to a member on the Senate:

> We had a huge confrontation in the Senate – I do not know if you heard about that. But what happened was that Stephen Salaita, he was chosen by a committee to be the Director of CASAR . . . 'Listen, you cannot appoint this guy. [there is] . . . somebody else in mind and [. . .] wants to appoint somebody different' [we were told]. (p. 3)

Relatedly, the relatively recent role of disciplinary subject associations in the global Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, which was initiated by Palestinian civil society in 2005, also illustrates how disciplines 'at the centre' have been affected with the 'transnational' turn, the American Studies Association, the Association for Asian American Studies, the American

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

Anthropology Association, and the International Sociological Association, vocalising support for the BDS movement (Kiwan, 2017a).

3.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM

This chapter has interrogated the various contested constructions of knowledge, investigating how such conceptions affect understandings of academic freedom. What are the implications of understanding academic freedom when teaching and research are conceived of as discovering an empirical, verifiable, and external truth? Will this conception of academic freedom differ from a conception of academic freedom when knowledge is conceived as constructed, partial, and relationship, situated within geographical and historical contexts? And further, how is academic freedom impacted by a conception of knowledge as capital, with an emphasis on skills to serve the economy?

In the UK and US contexts, there has been a resurgent discourse of support for academic freedom, in the context of challenges to the Canon and disciplinarity largely aligned to right-wing conservative ideologies, which has been critiqued by the liberal left wing as a disingenuous attempt to weaponise academic freedom to, in effect, challenge and restrict the production of new knowledges that challenge the status quo: 'This whole debate about academic inclusion and diversity, you know, was an attack on academic freedom, it's just like, it's a huge mirage where they just want to do what they want to do and they do not want to be more inclusive. And that's it you know' (Professor of Sociology, UK, p. 5). The construction of knowledge as out there in the world to be discovered, with a denial of the role of values in the production of this knowledge, inevitably leads to the dismissal of knowledge conceived as relational, contextual, and positioned, as this is deemed to be politicised. Commenting on the value-ladenness of science: 'Science is full of values in terms of how we investigate things but also in terms of what we investigate as well' (Lecturer in Medical Ethics and Humanities, UK, p. 10). The quality of scholarship is also invoked at the level of method to discredit new knowledge, engaged in by both liberals and conservatives. This weaponisation of the accepted methods of the disciplines and the perceived 'gold' standard of the Canon could be perceived as a masking of what is tantamount to an infringement of academic freedom for those working in new fields or those challenging the canon: 'the power of who gets to name academic freedom' (Professor of Sociology, UK, p. 5).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005

In contrast, at a theoretical level, when knowledge is recognised as partial, positioned, and contextualised, a range of perspectives is more easily accommodated, with a broader tolerance for academic freedom. Yet, the question of 'red lines' also remains within this framework of knowledge, expressed in affective and morally imbued discourses of values when challenging research is deemed to be 'racist', 'imperial', or 'sexist', for example: 'Hate does not advance knowledge. It is not expressing a view that is otherwise unknown' (Professor of Gender Studies, p. 7). This attests to a conceptualisation of academic freedom itself as relative rather than as absolute. This relates to the notion of the preconditions for academic freedom as discussed in the previous chapter. However, importantly, these are *a priori* conditions framing academic freedom guided by commitments to social justice and inclusivity, rather than *a posteriori* infringements posed in response to challenges to White supremacy and maintenance of the privileges of the status quo.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 17:09:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108780629.005