

Course title: *Academic freedom and the gendered aspects of de-democratization:*

Hope and care for 'the otherwise'

Course description

This PhD training school explores the tensions between academic freedom, ontological politics, and intersectional gender in a time of global poly-crises and shifting geo-politics.

The training school supports PhD-students and early-career scholars in navigating research areas affected by turbulent times while writing their dissertations or scholarly texts, from different gendered and intersectional positionalities; focusing on heavily debated, politicized, unconventional, or even miscredited subject areas and/or approaches.

Currently, 'margin studies' (Braidotti 2018) such as gender studies, queer studies, critical race theory, diversity studies, decolonial and activist methodologies as well as intersectional approaches occupy a particularly heated position due to current geopolitical shifts and associated controversies. These studies challenge uneven, and often unjust, distributions of power and structural inequalities, hence raising critical (and sometime unpopular) questions regarding epistemic violence, systems of oppression, and damage-centred research.

In addition to adopting a critical stance, these studies also challenge what is considered "real" and fixed, as well as what is typically left out or could be understood otherwise. This insistence means that such research fosters not only a critical perspective but also a hopeful engagement with difference, alterity, and the possibilities of the "otherwise." They often highlight what remains unstudied, unsaid, or undone, yet is nonetheless real and felt (Flemming et al., 2022; Plotnikof et al., 2022; Raffnsøe et al., 2022). Consequently, these studies have become focal points in contemporary tensions between academic freedom, on the one hand, and different onto-epistemological politics, on the other - that is, debates about how the 'real' is implicated in the 'political,' and vice versa (Barad, 2007; Mol, 1999; Bacchi, 2012).

In this training school, gender (including its intersection with other power axes and forms of oppression) functions as a prism through which we examine what happens *in the eye of the storm*: How researchers can ask questions, make methodological and conceptual choices, and navigate political and epistemic pressures connected to global and local questions of social justice, inequity and power. The discussions will therefore also be relevant for a much broader range of research fields marked by contested ontological politics and challenges to academic freedom (such as research on climate, vaccine, migration, racialization, health, decolonial approaches) while at the same time exploring how such geo-political shifts and their anti- og de-democratization have (intersectional) gendered effects (Butler, 2022; 2024; Hemmings 2022)).

Academic freedom lies at the very heart of the university. It applies to research, teaching, and dissemination. As an ideal, academic freedom enables researchers to explore their fields with curiosity, without having to accommodate what is politically convenient or publicly acceptable. Academic freedom is not the same as freedom of speech. It is not a right to say anything whatsoever (Scott 2017). Rather, academic freedom concerns the freedom to pursue and care about new forms of knowledge and understanding - even when such knowledge is perceived as controversial or unpopular (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 2013). The quality of knowledge production depends on researchers' right to and possibility of investigating openly, without external interference and without fear of subsequent sanctions (Aberbach & Christensen, 2018; Brøgger & Dakowska 2026; Harding et al., 2013; Staunæs, Raffnsøe & Brøgger 2025). It entails the right to pursue, what one does not yet know (also about controversial and

critical issues) - and even what one does not yet know that one does not know. In this sense, academic freedom is not primarily about *what one may say*, but about *what one may do*: the freedom to conduct research, to teach, and to communicate knowledge, including politicized areas.

However, academic freedom exists in tension with *ontological politics*. The concept of ontology invokes essence in its focus on realities or 'what is', while politics—at least as understood in modern, democratic, and multicultural societies – implies contestation, struggles and conflicts of interests. Emerging from the so-called *ontological turn* in anthropology and the social sciences, the concept of ontological politics highlights that many contemporary conflicts are not merely disagreements about perspectives on a shared reality, but clashes between different wor(l)dings themselves, including different regimes of care, responsibility, and academic value (Barad 2007; Moll 1999; Haraway 2016).

Increasing political steering of research both supports and constrains research areas and methodologies – some more than others. In many contexts, gender studies, queer studies, critical race theory, diversity studies, decolonial and activist methodologies as well as intersectional approaches are marginalized or delegitimized as they might challenge and disrupt existing structures of oppression and inequity. Conversely, research on binary gender categories (men/women, girls/boys), neurodiversity, nationalism, and intervention-based studies are often politically and economically prioritized. How do we as researchers navigate these tensions and oppositions; how does it affect our research and academic life; and how is it implicated in much larger, planetary affective discursive structures?

Academic freedom depends on societal goodwill. With the academic freedom comes an obligation: to explain what we as researchers seek to understand, how and why we conduct research, and what emerges from it. However public judgment, responses and sentiments influence the goodwill no matter. Academic freedom therefore entails an ethics of care—attentiveness to the realities and actors we engage with, responsiveness to their reactions, and responsibility for the consequences of our work (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 2013). This also entails carefully developed, systematic practices and quality criteria, upon which research integrity, credibility and legitimacy depend, especially when research knowledge circulates beyond the university (Dobush et al., 2025) and encounter the public.

These tendencies must be taken seriously - not only in illiberal or authoritarian societies, but also in open, democratic ones (Benschop et al., 2026; Grzebalska & Pető 2018; Pető 2018). Political attempts to prioritize, obstruct or discredit research on specific topics or approaches are increasingly visible within liberal democracies as well. When researchers must spend their time defending themselves in politicized controversies, recovering from harassment or anticipating the public opinion, moods and responses (emerging at for instance SoMe-platforms or on public sites), there is less time and energy for slow archival work, in-depth interviews, large-scale data analysis, and careful, reflexive interpretation

In short, academic freedom is the right—and responsibility—to investigate the world systematically and ethically, even when findings do not align with dominant political, public, or economic sentiments. However, under contemporary pressures, these critical questions arise:

- How free is research, and how “secure” is knowledge production, when pressured by different ontological politics, different ethics, and different epistemologies as well as scarce resources in the neoliberal university?
- What are the gendered effects of the attack on specific research areas and paradigms such as gender studies and the de-democratization of knowledge production? How does this invigorate old

structures of inequality and how does that impact research and the sense of being a careful researcher?

- How do we mobilize hope, courage, capacity, and time to take risks, challenge dominant assumptions, and produce unpopular and genuinely new knowledge? How may we develop and contribute with new concepts, counter-imaginings and alliances?
- What forms of epistemic practices of care, resistance, refusal and/or opacity can be developed in the face of oppressive systems of knowledge production? How can we nurture research communities and infra-structures locally and globally across positionality and privileges that support such practices?
- How is it possible to sustain and further grow the reparative, the transformative, and affirmative drives inherent to intersectional and decolonial forms of gender research?
- How may institutional risk management—through alignment with political agendas—affect, challenge, or perhaps even outweigh genuine, critical, and responsible curiosity?

These are some of the key questions explored in this PhD training school, organized **OPEN COST action (CA22121): Rising nationalisms, shifting geopolitics and the future of European higher education and research openness** ([OPEN](#)) in collaboration with the **PhD School at Arts, Aarhus University**.

Aim/Learning outcomes

The training school supports PhD students and early-career scholars in navigating research areas affected by turbulent times while writing their dissertations or scholarly texts, from different gendered and intersectional positionalities; focusing on heavily debated, politicized, unconventional, or even miscredited subject areas and/or approaches.

Requirements for participation

The training school/PhD-course is open to everyone, not only to those who explicitly work with gender. The OPEN Cost Action will reimburse accommodation, subsistence, and travel expenses for early career scholar participants in the COST Action. Participants outside the action are expected to cover their travel and accommodation costs; the training is free.

Deadline for applications May 1st 2026, will be announced at the PhD school's web-page.

In advance, participants will be invited to reflect upon and write 2-3 pages on:

- How is my PhD project affected by the current turmoil surrounding intersectional gender and "margin studies"?

- How are the gendered aspects of de-democratization reflected in my project or in the contexts in which my project is situated?
- How can I practice academic freedom responsibly in my PhD research, particularly in relation to conceptual development, methodology, and dissemination?
- Which forms of ontological politics challenge and enrich my PhD project?
- How can I contribute to and work toward new counter-imaginings and alliances?
- How do public sentiments surrounding specific fields, such as intersectional gender research, influence my research choices, positioning, navigation practices, and scholarly contributions?

Preliminary program

A combination of lectures, independent laptop work, and facilitated group reflections and discussions. These activities are based on key texts and are designed to support the development of your own theoretically informed approach to academic freedom and the gendered dimensions of de-democratization, with a focus on hope and care for "the otherwise."

A reading list will be made available in advance

June 8th 10.30-16.00

10.30 Welcome, presentations, and group work

12.00 Lunch

13.00-14.30 Talks (Andrea Petö, Michalinos Zembylas)

14.45- 16.00 Discussions and laptop-time

June 9th 9.30-15.30

9.30 Laptop-time

Groupwork on readings and projects

12. 00 Lunch

12.45-14.15 Talks (Mie Plotnikof, Iram Khawaja)

14.15- 15.30 Discussions and laptop time

Optional: Dinner at your own expense (Venue TBA)

June 10th 9.30-15.30

9.30. Laptop time

Groupwork on readings and projects

12.00 Lunch

12.45-Talks (Hande Eslen Ziya, Dorte Staunæs)

14.15- 15.30 Discussions and laptop time

Wrapping up & goodbye

Target group/Participants

PhD-students at all levels of the PhD-education course

Workload

- Course/ teaching hours: 20 hours
- Preparation hours: Reading the reader in advance and reflecting upon the questions
- Written assignments etc.: 2-3 pages beforehand, further writing is integrated in the course with 1 hour daily

Language

- English

Lecturers

Associate Professor Iram Khawaja, Aarhus University

Professor, Andrea Pető, Central European University, Vienna

Associate Professor, Mie Plotnikof, Aarhus University

Professor Dorte Staunæs, Aarhus University (chair)

Professor Michalinos Zembylas, University of Cypress and University of Johannesburg

Professor, Hande Eslen Ziya, University of Stavanger

Literature

- List of the literature will be distributed after the application deadline

Venue

Aarhus University, Danish School of Education, Tuborgvej 164, room **number A200**