

# The Space of Bad Faith

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## ABSTRACT

Provoked by Ananya Roy's activist lecture tour, this essay questions the efficacy of academia's social critique and the notions of agency and vocation that emerge therefrom. Moving from Roy's reinterpretation of liberalism and Marxism to an appraisal of academic space as a faithless one shorn of its intended social and urban impact, this essay wonders out loud if academic production is too safe a space when it comes down to the political. Academics are necessarily involved in the production of sociopolitical conditions which are the subject of academic criticism. Rather than disavowing their connection to the nation state, academics should acknowledge their role in it. Taking cues from popular culture, this essay polemically prods scholars toward a discomfiting disengagement from the academic comfort that may stand in the way of difficult engagement with the world beyond academia. Aspirational as this is, the hope is that the practice of humbling (self-) honesty short-circuits to a hubristic heroism, mortal as that may be.

“[E]xperience with academic reform illustrated how radical some professors can be when they look at the external world and how conservative when they look inwardly at themselves – a split personality.”

-Clark Kerr<sup>1</sup>

“There is very little danger that our images of the good society, or the good city, will be abused by leaders mad for power, by turning them into yet another tyranny, or that our words will send waves of good society warriors to their ignoble death, as they try to scale the impossible walls of utopia. If indeed I thought that was the case, I would stop writing now.”

-John Friedmann<sup>2</sup>

In his inaugural address as the University of Michigan’s 10<sup>th</sup> president, Harold Shapiro pronounced that the university was at once society’s servant and its critic.<sup>3</sup> Though this duality appears schizophrenic, the two modes of academe coexist in a convenient symbiosis comprising discrete but coextensive professional and scholarly tracks. This is not to deny that the university affords space for its members to alternate between these two hats, but they have grown comfortable wearing their favorite of the two. They are generally content with occupying different institutional registers, the cerebral gazing over the servile. But as Shapiro’s formulation suggests, to be critical is not enough to be of service. Academics ought to acknowledge that, in their capacities as intellectuals and mentors, they are necessarily involved in the production of sociopolitical conditions which are the subject of academic criticism. Turning the critical gaze to academic criticality means puncturing its image as a benignly rarefied indulgence and coming to terms with the fact that theory has non-quietistic consequences. Given their relative privilege, I wonder what it would look like for critics to try on new headgear or expose

their crowns altogether.

I am here provoked by Ananya Roy’s recent scholarly turn. Acutely aware of the advent of the “Age of Trumpism,” she has embarked on an international academic lecture tour to challenge the new(ly barefaced) status quo.<sup>4</sup> Her lectures are fitting denunciations of the illegalities of legal power and the criminalization of innocent behavior. More subtly, they are critiques of the inhospitality of internalized political identity and of an academic life unexamined.

A scholar of global and postcolonial urbanism, Roy has long critiqued the flattening of global urban and sociocultural differences perpetrated by urban studies, asserting that the particularities of cities in the Global South ought to be studied on their own terms and not against Euro-American urban models. To use Arif Dirlik’s terms, Roy’s postcolonialism is a product of her position as one of those “Third World intellectuals who have arrived in First World academe.”<sup>5</sup> As a scholar of Indian origin producing scholarship at American universities, Roy finds herself in the mouth of a dragon she wishes to slay. It is no surprise that her recent scholarship turns

to this tension between her position as critic of the forms of knowledge produced in the Western academy and her privileged position as a producer within it.

When Roy exclaims that her goal as a scholar is to effect a “divestment from whiteness,” she essentially condemns the ‘classic’ liberal notions that emerge from said ‘whiteness.’ While it may not be difficult for us to accept her critique of ‘personhood’ and ‘property,’ more challenging is its implied critique of academic criticality, of “white Marxism.” The tradition of the ethnically European intellectual paying perfunctory scholarly homage to socio-economic justice is no longer acceptable. It is about time that scholars put their money where their pens are.

But what does this mean other than provincializing Europe? For one, it entails questioning what counts as academic expertise, and perhaps even an emergence from under the thick but comfortable blanket of scholarly dogma. Critical theory, at the mere level of theory, perpetuates

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the oppressiveness which it seeks to unmask because the unfortunate by-product of the theorist’s expertly woven web is an inescapable sense of hopelessness; “What happens,” as Frederic Jameson so forcefully put it, “is that the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or

logic – the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example – the more powerless the reader comes to feel.”<sup>6</sup> Ironically, the scholar’s power feeds off the recipient’s powerlessness in a paradoxical conflict of interest; the very opponent that the theorist disarms is not structural hegemony but the reader’s mental capacity to (re)act. Jameson elaborates the mechanism through which such a reversal takes place:

    Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralysed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself.<sup>7</sup>

Jameson’s critique builds on the charitable premise that scholarship is, for the most part, earnestly serious, but accounts not for the possibility that it may be self-serious, or even sanctimonious so as to dispel the myths of its irrelevance, of its superfluity. Does knowledge production itself not constitute an indulgent (self-)distraction, an intellectual alibi from worldly engagement, a “culture industry” as the Frankfurt School would say?<sup>8</sup>

More importantly, Roy asserts that academia’s established forms of criticism are complicit in racial capitalism – that is, the production of spatial inequality under liberal democracy. The inadequacy of Marxist notions may be remedied, in her opinion, by embracing W. E. B. Du Bois’s work, which foregrounds urban racial banishment. Rendered in more contemporary terms, the reinterpretation of liberalism must take place through the lens of “poor group activism.”<sup>9</sup> This line of reasoning is certainly not novel. At least as early as Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* revealed that the theory’s normative reading of history and exclusive re-writing of the present was an ethnocentric call to action, Marxism has been marked as a racialized

philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Neither is Roy's attempt to reawaken the dormant new; one only has to read Andrew Abbott's work on academic professionalization and disciplinary formation to recognize the cyclicity of knowledge production, the fractal ebb and flow of the same set of ideas in a world-historical arabesque of human knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

This means that we have to resist the urge to continue feeding a discursive perpetual motion machine. Reconsidering the limits of the academy as we know it requires that we reshape the theoretical self-understandings with which we have grown comfortable, as Roy has begun to do. To co-opt Robinson's title, Roy's is a 'person of color' Marxism, or a non-professorial Marxism. But retooling our thinking is only the beginning. To reinterpret the ivory tower, we would be well served to remember what this lapidary label originally meant. While it is widely understood today as a metaphor for academia's elitist insularity, the term was originally coined for a different but not unrelated purpose: it castigated academia's political intransigence – namely, its hesitance to readily embrace anti-Communist patriotism.<sup>12</sup> While academia may indeed be applauded for attempting to resist the hysteria of the Red Scare, to merely applaud the academic establishment is to accept complacency, if not the socio-political complicity of which Roy speaks. Bluntly put, there is no such thing as a principled (read: academic) withdrawal from society. Even mythical Wakanda came to accept that an enlightened hermit kingdom was no beacon of light for the world.<sup>13, 14, 15</sup> The academy is no virtuous city; endless brooding and academic agonism over profound truths are trivial relative to the trials and tribulations of life.

To use a Game of Thrones analogy, scholars are the Starks, Lannisters, and Tyrells of an intellectual Westeros, fighting with words over a lectern throne while the world around them falls apart.<sup>16</sup> What our Intellecteros is missing is a Daenerys, an

insurgent playing the same game but very differently: unshackling slaves, winning fealty, building an army by saving both lives and livelihoods.<sup>17</sup> The scholarly class may perhaps identify with the Starks, but it would behoove it to acknowledge its own stark feudality.

The academic relationship to the profane is no less than a vicarious one. No matter how Vulcan academics may strive to be, on their shoulders falls the burden of the Jedi amidst a fractious world.<sup>18</sup> Fallibly privileged, theirs is the last station in the two-decade-long minting of national standard bearers.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup> Roy recognizes that the pursuit of truth is not above worldly affairs. Her contentions are premised on the unforsakeability of politics. The political can no longer be untangled from the existential. If the rise of the nation-state was indeed a liberalist alternative to god and king, as Benedict Anderson argues, the baby of pastoralism must have been thrown out with the water of paternalism.<sup>22</sup> In the new world order, patriotism replaced ecumenicism and the nation-state became the new denomination, a novel geopolitical tribe making total war possible.

The inverse of Monarchy and Faith being collective atheism, abstract politics became the sole modern realm of collectivity, granting the restless human the subject-position of citizen whose worthy and valiant self-sacrifice was redirected towards a secular, but just as inaccessible, cause. Inherent to the nation-state model then is the sacrifice of lives and trampling of bodies. Within this paradigm, human compassion is only legitimate when coupled with nationalism, for the glory of the nation is modernity's larger-than-life purpose of life.<sup>23, 24, 25, 26</sup>

This aggregate form of vanity similarly afflicts Marxism, whose reification of class underwrites the discharging of humans from the barrels of a tautological cause. One of theory's roles is to articulate a "salve for the anxiety of approaching self-



Figure 1. "Is the lectern throne an academic's perennial precious?" (Illustration by author).

dissolution."<sup>27</sup> These articulations take different forms, like the nation and the party, which become worth dying for. Roy is rightly critical of the scholars who pull that trigger but would never put themselves in the barrel. They are a 'class consciousness' – a party – just intelligent enough not to paint themselves as such, for to claim the paternalistic designation of organized governing collective is to dissolve the veneer of benign wisdom.

This makes sense in light of Roy's assertion that "the most important terrain of politics is the university."<sup>28</sup> If the humanities tell us what it means to be human, then they necessarily also demarcate that which is subhuman. How bloody were the American and French Revolutions that scholars so admire, and how bloody were the Haitian and Russian Revolutions they care not to admire! How worthless were the past lives and bodies of the

royalists, how worthless are the lives of today's extra-nationals! Theorists shield themselves from such externalities, ignoring the inconvenient truth that justice is rarely bloodless.

The truth is that theory can be deadly, and the rule of law can be deadly. Just as they serve to assert the value of human life, they allow us to assign value to the denial of life.<sup>29, 30</sup> Academic calls to arms are not always metaphorical.<sup>31, 32, 33</sup> Even when they are, theoretical enactments are liable to take on necropolitical lives of their own.<sup>34</sup> Though we are not remotely likely to stop

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producing theories, technologies, and images of a different tomorrow, we should at the very least wrestle with the real possibility that “our words will send waves of good society warriors to their ignoble death, as they try to scale the impossible walls of utopia” – and with the unfortunate reality that the route to the latter often runs through the former.<sup>35</sup> Exceedingly challenging as it is to articulate what is worthy of the (citizen’s and scholar’s) ultimate sacrifice, an opportunity looms to redefine that which is worthy of being sacrificed.

As much as we hate to admit, saviors come “not to bring peace, but a sword.”<sup>36</sup> In a way,

Roy claims one sword along with which comes a concurrent right to its acumination. She does not simply accept her academic ‘license to kill’ but commandeers it in order to recast the dragon on the shoulders of which she soars as a sacrificial lamb.<sup>37</sup> Less putting words in her mouth than putting a dagger in her hand, her scholarship is one that acknowledges its self-righteousness and turns scholarship against itself. To use an Inception metaphor, the only way out of an elaborate dream is to shoot oneself in the head.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bader AlBader is a doctoral candidate in architecture at the University of Michigan. His research examines the spaces and institutions of higher education and the ways in which they contribute to the development of cities and states, particularly in the Arab World. He holds a Bachelor of Architecture from Pratt Institute and a Master of Arts in Architecture from Rice University.

## ENDNOTES

1. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), viii.
2. John Friedmann, "The Good City: In Defense of Utopian Thinking," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24.2 (June 2000): 461-62.
3. Shapiro's 1980 speech is quoted in Jacqueline Mullen and Jackson Voss, "Servants and Critics," *State & Hill* (Fall 2017): 6. This conceptualization of the university underpinned Shapiro's career as a higher educational leader; see Eric Quiñones, "Universities fill dual role as servant and critic," *Princeton Weekly Bulletin* 95, no. 15 (February 13, 2006).
4. One of these lectures took place at the University of Michigan on November 17, 2017. For more on her present calling, see Ananya Roy, "The Infrastructure of Assent: Professions in the Age of Trumpism," *Avery Review* 21 (2017).
5. Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Winter 1994): 339.
6. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 57.
7. Jameson, "Postmodernism," 57.
8. See Theodor W. Adorno and J. M. Bernstein, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001).
9. Ananya Roy, "The City in the Age of Trumpism: From Sanctuary to Abolition," lecture at Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, November 17, 2017.
10. See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983).
11. For example, see Andrew Abbott, "The Disciplines and the Future" in *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University*, ed. Steven Brint (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
12. See LaDale C. Winling, *Building the Ivory Tower: Universities and Metropolitan Development in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).
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14. See Karl Baumann, "Why Utopia," *Infrastructures of the Imagination: Building New Worlds in Media, Art, and Design*. (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2018): 313-16.
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16. See Omid Safi, "The White Walkers of White Supremacy," *On Being*, July 21, 2016, <https://onbeing.org/blog/omid-safi-the-white-walkers-of-white-supremacy/>.
17. See Zeynep Tufekci, "The Real Reason Fans Hate the Last Season of *Game of Thrones*," *Scientific American Blog*, May 17, 2019, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/the-real-reason-fans-hate-the-last-season-of-game-of-thrones/>.
18. For more on fallibility, see Sara Martín, "Obi-Wan Kenobi and the Problem of the Flawed Mentor," *Foundation* 48 no. 132 (2019).
19. For relatively recent examples of how higher education has been positioned at the service of citizen formation, that is, the production of the national subject, see Patricia King, Marie Kendall Brown, Nathan Lindsay, and Jones Vanhecke, "Liberal Arts Student Learning Outcomes: An Integrated Approach," *About Campus* 12 no. 4 (2007).
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21. For globalization-borne challenges to this relationship, see Miriam Faine, Sue Plowright, and Terri Seddon, "Higher Education and Social Cohesion: Universities, Citizenship, and Spaces of Orientation," in *Creating Social Cohesion in an Interdependent World: Experiences of Australia and Japan*, eds. Ernest Healy, Dharma Arunachalam, and Tetsuo Mizukami (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
22. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).
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27. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Natural Causes: Life, Death and the Illusion of Control* (London: Granta, 2018), 191.
28. Roy, "The City in the Age of Trumpism."
29. See Faith Taylor, "Reproduction at the End of Humanity: Refusing Apocalypse and Dismantling the Threat of the New," Public Seminar, August 28, 2019, <https://publicseminar.org/essays/reproduction-at-the-end-of-humanity/>.
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31. See Omer Bartov, "Extreme Violence and the Scholarly Community," *International Social Science Journal* 54, no. 174 (2002).
32. For a historical example, see Trevor Barnes and Claudio Minca, "Nazi Spatial Theory: The Dark Geographies of Carl Schmitt and Walter Christaller," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 3 (2013).
33. For a contemporary example, see Uri Yacob Keller, "Academic Boycott of Israel and the Complicity of Israeli Academic Institutions in Occupation of Palestinian Territories," *Economy of the Occupation: Socioeconomic Bulletin* 23 (2009).
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35. Friedmann, "The Good City," 462.
36. Matt, 10:34 (New Living Translation).
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