When it comes to cases like that of Avita Ronell, American universities can learn a lot from British ones, argues Rebecca Gould.

By Rebecca Gould // September 13, 2018

August 2018 may turn out to be a watershed month for the academic humanities. That was the month during which a scandal that had been brewing ever since June, beginning with a notorious letter that appeared on a leading philosophy blog, dated May 11, climaxed in a lawsuit against Avital Ronell, a critical theorist at New York University, who stands accused of sexual harassment by a former graduate student, Nimrod Reitman. The letter, which threatened various kinds of retaliation for Ronell’s punishment, was signed by many of the biggest names in contemporary critical theory, among them: Judith Butler, Emily Apter, Gayatri Spivak, Joan Scott, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jonathan Culler, Hent de Vries, Slavoj Žižek, Shoshana Felman and Sam Weber.

For many junior scholars and graduate students in literary studies and the humanities, those names hold the keys to their professional future. Letters from such individuals – or even in some cases, from their students and friends – secure fellowships, jobs and tenure. They make and break careers.

The May letter in defense of Ronell demonstrated full awareness of the power wielded by its signatories. Its concluding threat that any request from NYU that Ronell resign from her position “would rightly invite widespread and intense public scrutiny” relies on academic prestige to preclude a thorough examination of the harassment claims. It uses power in a precise and calculated way to shore up existing networks that prevent change within the academy and inhibit its democratization.

These networks exist in part to preserve the academic hierarchies that led to the scandal now attached to Ronell’s name, yet which are increasingly understood to be destructive to early career academics. In a reflection on the letter, Butler offered an apology for signing it in the name of the Modern Language Association (without, however, totally renouncing the letter itself). “We all make errors in life and in work,” she wrote. “The task is to acknowledge them, as I hope I have, and to see what they can teach us as we move forward.”

In the spirit of moving forward, as Butler proposes we do, and of learning from past mistakes, I suggest here some concrete steps that could be taken to democratize higher education in the United States. I write as an American who left the country after receiving my Ph.D. in 2013, and who has taught, supervised and researched at universities in Great Britain for the past three years. I have had ample opportunity to observe the radical differences between the two systems, many of which relate to matters of hierarchy and structural equality. While another essay could be written about what is missing from the U.K. system (notably, tenure), that is not the task for the present.
Academics should have to retire at 65. Until 2011, compulsory retirement was in effect in the U.K. British professors still retire much earlier than American ones, even though they are not legally obliged to do so. The likelihood that they will retire from full-time positions as soon as they reach 65 vastly increases the number of open positions available to early career academics. A similar approach in the universities in the United States would be a good first step toward dismantling hierarchies and opening opportunities for many more young scholars. Every retirement should result in a mandatory tenure-line replacement.

Of course, the feasibility of such a system depends on the availability of a pension plan, a guarantee that has recently come under threat within the U.K., where the U.S.-style 401k plan is seen as the future model. But, until this recent turn of affairs, the British pension system worked remarkably well and provided professors who reach retirement age with a guaranteed income for the rest of their lives. Even if this system can only be partially implemented, it should send a message that professors who teach into their 70s and 80s on a professorial salary, particularly when they already enjoy significant surplus incomes, are irresponsibly denying jobs to younger colleagues. Along these same lines, it should be noted that professorial salaries in the U.K. are regulated in order to avoid extreme income disparity.

Doctoral programs should adopt a shortened timeline. Students enter British Ph.D. programs on the basis of their dissertation proposals, having reached the level of M.Phil. candidates in American programs. To be admitted, students must be able to articulate what they will write about and develop a precise timeline for meeting their writing goals. Of course, like any major research undertaking, their projects change along the way, but there is no gap between starting a Ph.D. program and beginning work on a dissertation.

First-year Ph.D. students in the U.K. have chosen their advisor and topic by the time they start. They will have completed at least a full dissertation chapter by the end of their first year. There is also no preparatory coursework and hence none of the torturous graduate student seminar politics that fill the pages of the complaint against Ronell – and which may exacerbate the toxic atmosphere at many graduate programs across the United States.

The advantages of this system over the American model are incalculable. First, it cuts the number of years taken up by a Ph.D. drastically – often in half. For students who must take out loans, the costs are a fraction of what they are in the United States. Students do not need to support themselves through teaching, and can devote themselves wholly to their research and writing, which is completed much more efficiently as a result.

Most important, a shortened timeline means that students don't have to sacrifice as much as a decade of their lives in pursuit of this highest academic credential, as often happens in the United States. They can complete their doctorate in as few as three years, after which they are free to pursue a range of occupations within and outside the university. Those who don't obtain academic jobs and must leave the academy will not have sacrificed the same proportion of their lives as their American counterparts.

In addition, the job application process at U.K. universities is more transparent and less taxing for applicants. Letters of recommendation are only required for shortlisted candidates, and more attention is given to objective factors like publications and funding track record. Having sat on several search committees within the U.K., I can attest that the in-group network is less relevant to securing an academic position.

Spousal hiring should be discontinued. In the U.K., spousal hires never happen by design and only occasionally happen by accident – even for prestigious, high-level appointments and at institutions like the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In fact, a proposal for a spousal hire would be seen as a violation of the basic principles of non-discrimination and also rightly smack of nepotism.

Preferential treatment for spouses perpetuates the star system that lies at the heart of the culture critiqued in the complaint against NYU. Yet its practice within the American academy has been barely subjected to critique. Academics who benefit the most from this practice occupy the most visible positions of power.

Granted, the costs of forbidding spousal hires in a country that can be traversed in six hours by train are less than they would be in the United States. Partners in universities as far away as Edinburgh and London can regularly visit each other and even live together, given the U.K.'s size. Relationships are harder to maintain when one partner teaches in New York and the other teaches in Los Angeles.

But it is far from clear that this is the most important consideration. Not everyone is in a binary relationship (https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/rebecca-gould/love-without-monogamy), and the preference for academics so situated is arguably discriminatory. The democratizing effect of the abolition of spousal hiring is more important to the academy overall than are the demands of star academics. Universities should not be giving preferential treatment to certain candidates, cutting off jobs for others and compromising the integrity of the hiring process simply because of who their spouses happen to be.

What's more, spousal hiring has a toxic effect on graduate student morale, particularly young women. It sends a message to them (as it did to me) that becoming romantically involved with their professors is the surest path to career success. I have witnessed these dynamics in practice. At the university where I received my Ph.D., only three tenure-stream appointments in the field most proximate to my research were held by women, and two of those women obtained their positions in their capacity as the wives of star professors. The institution had used spousal hires in these cases as recruitment tools or as part of retention packages for these star professors.

How can an American university consistently oppose -- and sometimes formally forbid -- romantic relationships between students and their professors while at the same time rewarding professors who engage in such relationships by granting lifetime appointments to their new spouses? Amid such patriarchal norms, a fellow Ph.D.
What American universities can learn from those in the U.K. concerning the Ronell case (opinion)

Wives who obtain jobs or permanent appointments because of or who they marry are often vulnerable to being treated as subordinates and brilliant scholars. But when they are granted tenure-line appointments on the basis of their marital status rather than through a transparent process, such hiring practices should be called out for what they are: discrimination that perpetuates gendered structural inequality between students and professors. In rare cases when the spousal hire is male, this hiring practice still perpetuates a binary relationship structure.

Academic hierarchies are generated by systems that prevent those in power -- who are often kind, generous and caring -- from being held to account. Contrary to the star-studded mentality that has brought the humanities to its current mess, and which can normalize and institutionalize sexual harassment through the practice of spousal hiring, the task of institutional reform cannot be met by relying on the personal virtues of specific individuals. Our problems are structural.

Political scientist Corey Robin's comments on the NYU harassment case importantly remind us of the sheer arbitrariness of the professor-student relation, and the lack of any formal structures to prevent exploitation. That is what has to change. Some British-style professionalism would go a long way to democratize the academy in the United States. Free spirits sometimes flourish even in institutions rampant with inequality. But in the austere times that higher education finds itself today, when jobs are increasingly scarce and the Ph.D. does not guarantee a career in academe, the lack of accountability for American professors too often shores up the power of the tenured, the established and the privileged.

The academy is changing. Jobs are scarcer. Only by a long stretch of the imagination can Ph.D. programs be treated primarily as apprenticeships for academic careers. Doctoral programs can no longer be run like feudal monarchies, particularly when the ruler has no fiefdom to bequeath to their students following their graduation. To quote (https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2018/08/18/the-full-catastrophe/) one of Ronell's more articulate (https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/khurd-caliban-responds/) (if still misleading) defenders, Lisa Duggan, "If we focus on this one case, these details, this accuser and accused, we will miss the opportunity to think about the structural issues. If we are social justice feminists and not neoliberals, we care about the broad structures of power, and not individual bad apples case by case.” This is not to suggest that Duggan or any of Ronell's other defenders have lived up to these words, but it remains a worthwhile demand.

I have offered these proposals in the hopes of moving forward the critique of academe's undemocratic hierarchies -- and of not allowing Nimrod Reitman's story to be tallied as mere collateral damage in a saga we all have heard far too often and know too well.

Bio

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