Review

Silencing Mechanisms in Academia: Towards Collaborative Innovation to Support Critical Social Science

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Abstract: Critical social science (CSS) is a framework of social science that questions uneven relations of power to achieve transformative change towards equitable social outcomes. Scholars who pursue CSS are often politically and socially engaged to promote social progress, which puts them in direct conflict with hierarchies and hegemonic structures of power. As a result, CSS and scholars in this tradition have been the target of backlash that seeks to silence CSS in academia. We explain three dominant silencing mechanisms in academia that frame the backlash and attacks against CSS. Theorising collaborative innovation, we offer multilevel and inclusive design and solidarity as possible venues for resistance against the ongoing purge of CSS, which undermines autonomy, freedom of speech, and equality in academia.

Keywords: critical social science; silence; collaborative innovation; neoliberalism; higher education; academia

1. Introduction

Critical social science (CSS) is one of the fundamental frameworks in social science, alongside positivism, interpretivism, constructivism, and the postmodern paradigm, and offers an alternative way of thinking about social science with a fundamental focus on power and inequality, with an explicit commitment to social change towards even and equitable relations of power and resources in society (Sayer, 1997). Foundational critical social scientists like Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Antonio Gramsci, Georg Simmel, Herbert Marcuse, and Frantz Fanon critiqued capitalism, class, rationalisation, hegemony, alienation, consumerism, and colonialism, laying the groundwork for understanding power and inequality. Modern thinkers, including Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, Patricia Hill Collins, David Harvey, Angela Davis, Arlie Hochschild, Amartya Sen, and Achille Mbembe, have expanded these critiques to examine identity, intersectionality, neoliberalism, emotional labour, social justice, and necropolitics in contemporary society.

CSS has seen substantial international growth and evolution, driven by its expansion into diverse cultural, economic, and political contexts worldwide. Initially rooted in Western theoretical frameworks, CSS has adapted to address global issues such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and the dynamics of globalisation, particularly through the integration of critical perspectives on development, social responsibility, and public policy in regions like Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005; Prieto-Carrón et al., 2006). International collaborative efforts and educational initiatives have furthered

CSS's reach, fostering critical pedagogies and activist research that engage with local communities to address social inequities and empower marginalised groups (Kajner et al., 2013; White, 2015). This global diffusion underscores CSS's relevance across sociocultural boundaries, creating a diverse, adaptable framework that is increasingly embedded within both academic institutions and social movements worldwide.

CSS is a framework that seeks to uncover and address the ideological underpinnings and power dynamics within social institutions, emphasising the emancipatory potential of knowledge. CSS contrasts with traditional positivist approaches by revealing societal illusions and fostering critical reflexivity about social norms and practises (Sayer, 2009). Although CSS is explicitly committed to transformative social goals, it does not reject objectivity but recognises the significance of subjective realities. Rather than adopting a polarised view, CSS transcends the spurious divide between objective and subjective reality, supporting the perspectives of marginalised and silenced groups to highlight power imbalances and structural injustices that traditional frameworks may overlook or normalise (Greenhalgh, 1996; Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024b). This stance challenges the notion of objectivity as a neutral standard, suggesting it instead serves to legitimise dominant perspectives within scientific inquiry (Harding, 2013). CSS's heterodox status thus positions it as a legitimate scientific approach, distinct from mainstream paradigms due to its critical engagement with social power structures.

Kress (2011) discusses how CSS seeks to dismantle hierarchical knowledge systems, creating opportunities for collaborative and inclusive learning by breaking down traditional academic barriers (Kress, 2011). Garvey et al. (2017) also emphasise the risks that CSS scholars face when their work critiques dominant academic norms, which can impact career advancement within institutions that prioritise conventional paradigms. This approach is rooted in critical theory, aiming to critique systems contributing to human suffering, often linking theoretical critique with practical social change (Meyer-Emerick, 2005). In this way, CSS is inherently tied to normative discussions about justice, seeking to address social injustices by engaging with socio-political structures and encouraging the denaturalization of social forms (Dillard, 1991; Rehg, 2000).

What sets CSS apart from other approaches in social science is its engaged scholarship and its commitment to progress (Butler, 2022; Özbilgin et al., 2022). In contrast to other approaches of social science that may be driven by objective observation or the interpretation of social and individual subjectivities, CSS produces evidence to affect progressive social changes, transcending the spurious divide between objective and subjective reality. CSS often represents the voices and interests of disadvantaged groups to repair uneven relations of power. Due to its alignment with the interests of the disadvantaged, CSS stands as a heterodox discipline, that is, a legitimate but outside track among dominant approaches of social science that often serve the interests of the powerful, dominant, and hegemonic groups. This fundamental difference puts CSS in direct conflict with hierarchies of power and knowledge (Phillips, 2023), such as social policies driven by self-interest or commercial interest.

While CSS seeks to reveal and challenge oppressive systems, critics argue that it may sometimes overextend its scope and rely too heavily on normative assumptions. Hammersley (2005) contends that the extensive use of critical approaches can risk undermining scientific rigour by prioritising critique over constructive solutions and practical relevance. Additionally, Sayer (1997) highlights that CSS frequently assumes idealised alternative social structures without adequately assessing potential limitations or unintended consequences. Robinson (1992) points out that CSS's commitment to emancipatory goals might inadvertently establish new ideological constraints, calling into question the possibility of true academic neutrality. These critiques underscore the need for CSS to care-

fully balance its critical objectives with methodological rigour and ethical considerations, ensuring it remains inclusive and credible within the academic field. This commitment to questioning established social norms and power structures often marginalises CSS scholars in traditional and mainstream academic institutions, which may prefer conventional paradigms that align with dominant societal interests (Erbil et al., 2023).

The global emergence of a strong woke identity, i.e., an awareness of social justice, has been supported by the engaged scholarship of CSS (Prasad & Śliwa, 2024). Woke identity politics at the individual level and social movements at the macro level have been questioning hierarchies of knowledge and power, often supported by engaged CSS scholarship. However, CSS and its form of engaged scholarship that feeds into multilevel demands for social progress have been receiving setbacks, backlash, and a purge in political–economic systems that operate with ideological drives that would like to sideline, undermine, or ignore evidence from critical social scientists (Prasad & Śliwa, 2024; Özbilgin et al., 2022). In this paper, we examine the purge of CSS and the backlash it receives through three silencing mechanisms in academia. We also offer collaborative innovation to resist these three silencing mechanisms: First, the deinstitutionalisation of CSS. Second, disciplinary closure that undermines CSS. Third, the populists and libertarian attacks on CSS. We refer to collaborative innovation underpinned by a commitment to social and institutional progress and transformation as proposed by critical diversity scholars.

The marginalisation and suppression of CSS form only part of a more significant trend that silences voices challenging dominant approaches and power configurations. Social movements internationally have garnered significant support, engendering international conventions on gender, ethnicity, and disability equality at the level of the United Nations and with significant ramifications at national and supranational regulations and cultural change. They, by championing causes such as gender equality and economic justice, play a vital role in strengthening CSS (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2022; Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021a). They amplify critical perspectives and create public support for the transformative aims of CSS, thus helping to counteract institutional pressures that seek to marginalise this field. However, these movements and the speedy nature of change that they demanded received backlash and anti-woke mobilisation from power elites that benefit from the uneven relations of power vested in the status quo and traditional approaches to work and life (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024c). A reflection of this backlash exists in the higher education sector in multifaceted ways. For example, there is a growing tendency in universities to value research aligned with neoliberal, marketised and capitalist agendas, such as the expansion of degree programmes in line with market demands rather than social good (Olssen, 2020). As a result, universities underfund CSS programmes that contribute to social good and shut down departments and marginalised, if not harassed, academics carrying out politically and socially engaged research that promotes the social commons above and beyond market needs (Gill & Donaghue, 2016; Morrish & Sauntson, 2019). These acts not only fundamentally undermine the social commons role that CSS play in serving critical thought and social progress, but they also diminish the variety of frameworks and avenues for thinking in academia.

In addition, institutional policies and broader socio-political changes with the purge of CSS embed the means through which the resultant silence in academia operates. Silencing in academia is not felt in the same way across countries that made their industries responsible for social welfare and social good (Stiglitz, 2012; Vincent et al., 2024). An analysis of the inhibitive practises faced by CSS reveals that these challenges are often rooted in broader socio-political structures. In politically unstable or economically constrained contexts, academic silencing may reflect a systemic drive to maintain power hierarchies, wherein institutions deprioritise socially critical disciplines like CSS to align with national

or ideological agendas. Countries that lacked such responsibilisation had more adverse impacts on human rights and civil liberties in their sectors of employment, including universities (Küskü et al., 2021). In unsupportive national contexts, an increasing sense of populism and authoritarianism have made resisting these silencing mechanisms in academia and other sectors more difficult (Erbil & Özbilgin, 2023). Such path-dependent practises highlight the intersection of political, economic, and social forces, underscoring the need to contextualise CSS's marginalisation within these wider dynamics. Governments with unsupportive and populist approaches to CSS have long recognised that the very criticality of scholarship threatens to undermine their ideological agendas, with some resorting either to legislative means or simply the public discredit of CSS-based knowledge as unscientific and CSS teaching as defunct and unfit for corporate and marketised needs of the higher education sector. Although context shapes the form of marginalisation that CSS experiences in academia, we report that, even in the most stable North European contexts, there are strong reports of marginalisation and backlash against CSS (Johansson Wilén, 2024; Moran & Littler, 2020).

Examples of this international trend of undermining CSS are evident in several specific institutional actions and policies that further illustrate the global scope of this issue. At the University of Leicester, there have been significant reductions in staff at the management school, which have raised concerns about the institution's commitment to supporting CSS (Weale, 2021). Copenhagen Business School has seen diversity and inclusion studies targeted as unscientific (Friss, 2022). The Central European University (CEU), which has long been home to CSS programmes, was forced in 2019 under political pressure from the Hungarian government to move most of its operations out of Budapest to Vienna (Thorpe, 2018). Another striking case of how critical studies are under threat involves Western Australia's most prestigious universities, which have seen an erosion of support for critical research and policy analysis within their institutions (Beeson, 2021). These actions are part of a broader trend in diminishing support for CSS. This ongoing marginalisation underscores the political nature of CSS and its inherent challenge to entrenched power structures, illustrating the broader struggle for intellectual and academic freedom in the face of external pressures. Examples of unsupportive contexts are even more drastic in the developing countries of the Global South. For example, CSS issues such as inequality, poverty, discrimination and human rights are marginalised by hegemonic cultures and governments in many countries in Asia (cf. Özbilgin et al., 2024).

In this polarised and hostile global environment, we discuss below the three silencing mechanisms (the deinstitutionalisation of CSS; the disciplinary closure that undermines CSS; and the populist and libertarian attacks on CSS) and multilevel strategies of collaborative innovation (the macro-level engagement of actors with divergent stakes, backgrounds and motivations; the meso-level involvement of interdisciplinary approaches; and individual-level academic behaviours that accept diversity and promote inclusion) for resistance against silencing mechanisms to reinstate the freedom for critique within academia.

2. Silencing of Critical Social Science (CSS)

The purge of CSS has been an international phenomenon (Rousseau, 2020). CSS is political. It promotes engaged scholarship. It contrasts positivist science, which has a distant, disengaged, and supposedly objective stance to its evidence. CSS transcends the spurious divide between objective and subjective observation, promoting scientific enquiry and evidence as a transformative resource (Sayer, 1997). As such, CSS envisions engages scholarship and proposes an agentic role for science and scientists to transform the social world (Edwards, 2015). The engaged nature of CSS puts it in direct competition with hegemonic mechanisms and structures of power and knowledge that seek to sustain the

status quo and shape social policy and practises in line with hegemonic interest (Nagasawa & Swadener, 2016). While CSS has gained considerable recognition and legitimacy over the years, it has also received considerable criticism and backlash in social policy. We frame the contested terrain of social policy and mechanisms of silencing that CSS received in academia. The purge of CSS in academia manifests as three different silencing mechanisms: 1. deinstitutionalisation; 2. disciplinary closure; and 3. the populist and libertarian turn. Table 1 summarises the silencing mechanisms against CSS and the corresponding collaborative innovation strategies for resistance at multiple levels.

Table 1. Silencing mechanisms and strategies of resistance.

Silencing Mechanism	Description	Collaborative Innovation Strategy	Description of Strategy
Deinstitutionalisation	Removing institutional support for CSS, reducing funding and programme closures	Macro-level governance and policy engagement to ensure protection for CSS	Involve diverse stakeholders to advocate for policy changes supporting CSS
Disciplinary Closure	Restricting CSS legitimacy by favouring orthodox approaches, limiting resources	Meso-level organisational frameworks to integrate CSS in curricula and research	Restructure organisational policies to include CSS perspectives and resist closures
Populist and Libertarian Turn	Politicising and discrediting CSS as unscientific, fostering public opposition	Micro-level academic behaviours promoting inclusivity and interdisciplinary discourse	Encourage individual and collective behaviours that embrace diverse viewpoints

2.1. Deinstitutionalisation as a Silencing Mechanism

The backlash against CSS put schools and faculties of social science that have developed an ethos of housing and promoting CSS at the centre of attacks on CSS. For example, in the USA, the Trump administration reversed the clock in terms of the institutionalisation of CSS and defunded both international agencies and national institutions and universities that engaged in CSS, such as critical gender studies, critical race studies, and LGBT+ studies (Banwell, 2019). However, the deinstitutionalisation of CSS dates back decades. Internationally, there were efforts to deinstitutionalise CSS, through the closure, underfunding, and undermining of institutions with CSS orientations. Remarkable cases of this include the gradual purge of CSS departments, which were forced to change names and rebrand to escape the backlash. For example, industrial relations departments, which provided evidence-based insights into the tripartite trade union, government, and employer relations through critical lenses, have been targeted in the last 30 years. The closure of the Cultural Studies and Sociology department at the University of Birmingham is cited as a significant loss for critical pedagogy and an indicator of increasing bureaucratic constraints on intellectual spaces fostering critical scholarship (Gray, 2003). Similarly, Emory University's shutdown of its Educational Studies division in 2012 was attributed to a shift towards more commercially oriented academic goals, at the expense of programmes centred on social justice and educational foundations (Dunn & Faison, 2015). The impact of neoliberal policies on academic departments is further illustrated by the reduction or elimination of social science programmes across several institutions, where departments focusing on critical and cultural studies have been particularly vulnerable to budget cuts and institutional restructuring aimed at increasing market relevance (Marsh, 2005). Due to a global purge and changes in dominant ideologies from macro-political towards market individualisation, galvanised by alt-right and populist attacks on CSS, many industrial

relations departments that focused on and promoted a collective worker voice changed their names and curriculum to employment relations and human resource management. Furthermore, these departments' organisational behaviour, more recently, has aligned more with the interests of employers rather than workers, losing their critical edge (Alakavuklar et al., 2017; Darlington, 2009; Purcell, 1993).

Deinstitutionalisation came through the marketisation of higher education that undermined the relevance of subdisciplines of CSS in the world of work, often despite the evidence to the contrary in terms of the utility of these structures. For instance, in an increasingly competitive funding environment, academic institutions may adopt mainstream theoretical frameworks to secure financial resources, a strategy that risks marginalising CSS. This conformity acts as a survival tactic, enabling institutions to meet external funding criteria often set by public or private stakeholders who may favour conventional disciplines over critical, transformative research agendas. Such dependency structures inadvertently constrain the space for CSS and limit its institutional support. Sidelining heterodox science leads to distorted scientific findings that lack awareness and commitment to the concerns of marginalised and vulnerable groups, which CSS research often gives voice to (Greenhalgh et al., 2021, 2022). The minister of education in the UK branded and stigmatised equality, diversity, and inclusion interventions as a waste of resources (Özbilgin, 2022), although the academic evidence in that year showed the utility and positive collective outcomes of diversity badges in the UK (Chapman et al., 2023). Similarly, gender studies, LGBTQ+ studies, and women's studies faced challenges akin to those encountered by diversity badges in universities and industrial relations departments (Gimson, 2019). These disciplines, employing CSS analysis to challenge established power structures and advance social justice, have weathered financial constraints, departmental closures, and political opposition. For instance, a research project on decolonising sexual and gender-based violence at the University of Westminster, funded by UK Research and Innovation for nearly EUR 1 million, has faced criticism from politicians and academics who labelled it as wasteful woke spending, illustrating how critical scholarship can be publicly discredited (Gill, 2024). This marginalisation represents part of a broader trend in higher education where fields contesting tradition and advocating for marginalised groups now face growing dangers and setbacks. Gender studies departments exploring gender inequality, rights for those identifying as LGBTQ+, and women's empowerment often meet intense scrutiny and criticism from alt-right, conservative, and neoliberal factions, resulting in diminished funding, lessened institutional support, and constrained academic freedom. One remarkable example is the ultra-nationalist and religious Hungarian government's attack on academic freedom of its universities and the defunding of gender studies (Helms & Krizsan, 2017). Undermining such disciplines carries significant societal implications. It stifles generations of CSS-informed progressive social policies and practises, limits efforts to combat systemic inequities, and hampers efforts promoting inclusion and diversity both within and beyond academic institutions.

Turkey provides a stark example of these challenges. The Turkish Higher Education Council (YÖK) marginalised gender studies programmes at Turkish universities, after years of mounting animosity towards gender equality initiatives and LGBTQ+ rights (Özbay & İpekçi, 2024). This prohibition has impacted academic freedom and the ability to conduct research on gender-related issues in Turkey. The YÖK also removed gender equality from its agenda, which means a substantial roadblock for gender and equality strategies of Turkish universities (Demirbilek, 2019). The move is part of a wider backlash against academic fields that challenge established notions surrounding gender and sexuality, support for LGBTQ+ rights, and the empowerment of women. Turkish scholars in these fields have faced persecution and job losses (Dayan, 2016). In similar ways, in other European and

North American countries, scholars also attempted to undermine and ridicule inclusion research (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2024a). These developments underscore the global nature of the challenges facing CSS disciplines and highlight the need for international solidarity and support for academics working in these fields, particularly in contexts where political and ideological forces threaten their work.

2.2. Disciplinary Closure and Domination as a Silencing Mechanism

The engagement with CSS in evidence-based policy is undermined through the devaluation of CSS-based evidence, with preference for other dominant approaches ranging from positivism, constructivism, and postmodern social science (Brabet et al., 2021). This second mechanism of silencing through disciplinary closure comes with the misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1997) of CSS as unscientific advocacy work, undermining its legitimacy as a social science framework (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2019). The pushback of CSS evidence has much to do with the ongoing battles between scientific orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the former of which is supported by the hegemonic structures of power (Nagasawa & Swadener, 2016), and CSS as a heterodox often gets attacked and pushed out by the inside track. Some remarkable examples of such disciplinary closure are undermining research and science through the hegemonic acceptance of neoliberal values such as individualisation as opposed to social good, financialisation as opposed to the common good, and marketisation as opposed to the public good.

Disciplinary closure does not only manifest as intrafield struggles between paradigms and sub-disciplines of social science. It also manifests in how research structures and resources are allocated. Research funding and industry partnerships can undermine certain forms of engaged knowledge generation that CSS provides (Sarpong, 2023). For instance, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the system of assessing research quality in UK higher education institutions, gives us one concrete manifestation: an overemphasis on measurable impacts can leave critical work at a disadvantage because it does not deliver marketised, instant, or definite results. Stein et al. (2019) note that private and commercial funding trends increasingly support STEM fields over social sciences, arts, and humanities, leaving CSS with fewer resources. Bromham et al. (2016) add that interdisciplinary projects, often essential in CSS for addressing complex social challenges, have lower funding success rates due to biases in grant review processes favouring single-discipline studies. CSS outcomes often have immeasurable social impacts. These market-oriented research agendas under the REF put social scientists in a position where they cannot speak critically and have their work impact on policy and practise misrecognised (Shaw et al., 2022).

The current dominance of orthodox science has the effect of marginalising CSS by setting strict criteria for legitimate research. Paradigmatic closure manifests as arbitrary hierarchies of methods and methodologies in social science. Positivist research methods are valorised over other research methods (Özbilgin, 2006). While qualitative methods may provide deep, contextual insights, research often prioritises quantitative over qualitative evidence (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2019). Longer forms of follow-up in studies may also enrich our understanding in critical and yet often undervalued ways (Alvesson & Deetz, 2020). As a result, CSS-based subtle and nuanced evidence gets devalued through crass and crude hierarchies of methodology that serve merely to sustain the status quo in science. This is made worse by the peer review gatekeeping processes, in which reviewers from dominant approaches may reject CSS contributions (Erbil, 2023). Not only does this systemic bias obstruct novel approaches, but it also deters those new to the field from practising CSS in a manner that upholds disciplinary closure (Özbilgin, 2009). The marginalisation of critical, interdisciplinary research is reinforced by the underrepresentation of CSS perspectives in top-tiered academic journals and across ranking practises of publishing houses that valorise

dominant research approaches. Such an absence of pluralism and interdisciplinarity in mainstream academic discourse restricts the scope and respectability of CSS research and evidence, leaving CSS scholars marginalised in having a respectable impact on policy and practice. Alvesson (2021) notes that critical management studies struggle to reach wider audiences because they are largely absent or ignored on mainstream academic platforms. This marginalisation and silencing through disciplinary closure not only restricts the way critical knowledge circulates but also forecloses its possibilities to transform society.

2.3. Libertarian, Neoliberal, and Populist Turn as a Silencing Mechanism

Libertarianism, neoliberalism, and populism have risen in recent decades to inform social policy, challenging the authority of some critical approaches of science in informing policy (Greenhalgh et al., 2022; Vassilopoulou et al., 2022). The belief that everyone can do their research and that populist yet baseless fears are legitimate ways of shaping social policy undermined the difference between scientific and non-scientific evidence and what constitutes evidence. Alongside orthodox and heterodox science, both of which are legitimate, this period has witnessed the emergence of sophism and scientism, which entail claims of scientific insight without scientific inquiry. Sophism employs fallacious arguments with the intent to deceive, often prioritising rhetorical prowess over factual accuracy. Scientism inappropriately applies scientific principles or asserts scientific insight without genuine scientific inquiry or evidence (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2019; Vassilopoulou et al., 2024). A particularly salient example of this trend is the manipulation of statistical data by populist factions to bolster biased political agendas (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2019). For instance, some groups misrepresent crime statistics to argue against immigration, despite robust evidence demonstrating that refugees and immigrants do not perpetrate crimes at higher rates than native-born citizens (Boateng et al., 2021; Kayaoglu, 2022).

In recent years, populism has inspired attacks on academic freedom of speech. For example, in the UK, the Science Minister, Michelle Donelan, made unsubstantiated charges about Professor Kate Sang based on her social media posts, culminating in the disbanding of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Expert Advisory Group that she served at the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) (Brown, 2024). The case was challenged in the courts, and the minister was made to pay damages. This case presents a vivid example of how political power based on populist arguments can suppress dissenting academic opinion. Grigoriadis and Işık Canpolat (2024) illustrate how populist narratives in Hungary and Turkey have specifically targeted universities like Central European University, associating them with elitism and liberal biases that are seen as threats to populist goals. These institutions, which promote social mobility and pluralistic values, are often at odds with the populist "us versus them" narrative, which positions the masses as the perennial underdog requiring protection from elite forces. Furthermore, Hawkins and Chinn (2024) analyse the U.S. context, where alt-right supporters and heavy social media users show heightened "science populist" attitudes, often linking the scepticism of scientific elites with broader mistrust in institutional expertise. This trend reflects an alignment of populist and libertarian beliefs that view CSS as promoting leftist ideologies that allegedly undermine true public values. Sullivan (2019) emphasises the authoritarian populist perspective, where right-wing movements worldwide have utilised populist rhetoric to de-legitimise CSS. This framing portrays CSS as a promoter of divisive issues such as feminism or multiculturalism, thus perceived as ideologically opposed to the populist emphasis on traditional, homogenous values. Such populist attacks on CSS highlights a much larger problem; the subversion of scientific debate in policymaking by sophism and scientism. This erosion of scientific authority and the rise in sophism and scientism in policymaking have profoundly affected academia and set the stage for academic silencing through the deterioration of core values.

In the context of this crisis of scientific authority and shifts in policymaking, the neoliberalisation of higher education has significantly transformed academic working conditions and institutional structures. The neoliberalisation of higher education has intensified precarious labour conditions and managerial control, leading to a crisis in work–life balance and exacerbating inequalities. Precarity, with its inherent job insecurity and exploitative contracts, combined with the relentless demands for performativity, silences dissenting voices and CSS scholarship (Chatterjee, 2022). The increasing prevalence of precarity (Meliou et al., 2024) within academia, characterised by short-term contracts and the lack of job security, engenders higher levels of self-performance for scholars against metrics that often put quantitative overreach ahead of relevant and engaged CSS scholarship. Consequently, the potential for CSS becomes diminished as scholars must conform to institutional expectations to maintain their current positions or secure future ones (Graham & Papadopoulos, 2023). However, social movements provide a counterbalance to these pressures by fostering platforms and public discourse that reinforce CSS recognition and advocacy. Movements for gender equality, racial justice, and economic equity, among others, have increased awareness and visibility for CSS scholarship, encouraging the establishment of specialised conferences, journal special issues, and research agendas that align with social change imperatives. This societal momentum adds significant support for CSS by connecting engaged scholarship with broader calls for structural reform and social progress, thus amplifying CSS's reach and relevance. In contrast, heightened levels of pervasive precarity and temporary employment throughout the academy restrict CSS scholars' capacities to speak out or think independently, as adherence to institutional prescriptions takes precedence over scholarly integrity (Vatansever & Kölemen, 2020). Overall, global ideological turns towards neoliberalism, libertarianism, and populism continue to exert a significant silencing impact on CSS scholars, who experience precarity, misrecognition, marginalisation, and devaluation as a direct result.

Having identified three silencing mechanisms that CSS suffer in academia, we turn to the transformative potential of collaborative innovation below to transcend the silencing of CCS in academia and beyond.

3. Theorising Collaborative Innovation for Overcoming the Silencing of CSS

Collaborative innovation is a process through which stakeholders and community organisations and individuals with diverse stakes and backgrounds get together to find innovative solutions to common problems (Torfing, 2013). Collaborative innovation is often an inclusive process, and its manifestations in academia would involve bringing heterodox voices to orthodox hierarchies of power and knowledge, sustaining and supporting interdisciplinarity. In response to the silencing mechanisms in academia, engaging with collaborative innovation as a means for expanding what is possible promotes academic inclusion, interdisciplinarity, and multiparadigmatic approaches. Collaborative innovation brings together various actors, such as academics, students, administrators and other partners with different approaches and backgrounds, to create new knowledge, policies or practises. It aims to advance environments that include and promote the views of all individuals, with an emphasis on representing the voices of historically underrepresented or marginalised communities to provide a level playing field (Livingstone, 2022). This is, of course, particularly exciting for CSS scholars, who have been systematically marginalised through both institutional and ideological means. Still, it also demonstrates how inclusive and collaborative strategies might open up significant new opportunities in academia.

Collaborative innovation for system change means establishing processes and structures that enable dialogue, learning together, and solving common problems across a wide

array of stakeholders. However, Özbilgin et al. (2016) warn that the stakeholder voice of less powerful actors could easily be framed as stakeholder noise, if stakeholder engagement is not regulated with principles of inclusive design and industrial democracy. True collaboration also contributes to collaborative innovation, fostering cross-discipline learning and cooperation in which a variety of viewpoints informs decision making. Participative design can help institutions develop policies and practises that better represent diverse voices and experiences, thus enriching the discourse in their field of work and meeting broader community needs more effectively (Lindsay et al., 2020). Involving scholars from different tiers and disciplines in academia helps strengthen the outputs of collaborative efforts across a broad range.

The role of pluralism emerges as a crucial element in fostering sustained collective innovation within environments rich in dissent (Shain et al., 2023). This phenomenon presents a significant challenge in crafting institutional frameworks aimed at mitigating conformity bias: we must resist the innate human tendency towards conformity and challenge consensus itself, recognising that pluralistic viewpoints may harbour inherent value. However, recent concerns have arisen regarding academic collaborations that appear to legitimise far-right ideologies and support echo chambers (Mudde, 2019). Consequently, progressive scholars must exercise caution as they forge innovative partnerships for scholarly pursuits. Promoting spaces that do not vilify difference in opinion, and diversity, whilst encouraging openness, should engender a more robust approach to inquiry. The ongoing contestation and far-right populism serve to destabilise our existing knowledge paradigms. Should academia reframe the presence of opposition as advantageous and no longer view submission to dogma as a prerequisite for survival, it may develop greater resilience. Moreover, the diversity of thought, particularly through the inclusion of those outside traditional academic circles, contributes to the creation of more effective solutions to complex social issues (Mariani et al., 2022).

Furthermore, a participatory approach to innovation allows for the redress of the power imbalances that exist at too many traditional academic institutions (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2022). At places where diversity is an integral part of the knowledge-creation process on top of being represented in terms of outputs, it challenges the hierarchical pattern of learning (Harding, 2019). In this way, collaborative innovation promised to open up a more democratic stage for knowledge production where an idea's worth is judged not by the status or qualifications of its originator but strictly on its merits and potential impact. In addition, it may serve as a link between higher education and society more generally, providing space to create knowledge that is both logically rigorous and practically applicable. This porosity may raise the social impact of university research and help resolve real-world problems (Nowotny et al., 2001). However, we need to recognise that collaborative innovation is not without its difficulties. There are questions of power relations within collaborations, opportunities for marginal voices to be co-opted, and the necessity of designing new systems for assessment which recognise cooperative effort if all these possibilities are to be realised (Bammer, 2019).

We suggest a multilevel collaborative innovation for combatting silencing mechanisms in academia. At each level, institutional and individual actors play different roles.

3.1. Macro-Level Collaborative Innovation

Social innovation and collaborative innovation happen when parties with different stakes, capabilities, and backgrounds come together to identify solutions to common problems and roadmaps for the future (Bridgstock et al., 2010; Alkan et al., 2022). Acausal togetherness of actors with divergent backgrounds, stakes, and motives generates innovative outcomes, changing the rules of the game (Özbilgin, 2024). At the macro level

of governance of the higher education sector, there are varied models that support the inclusion of dissenting voices in academia. Governance systems that support voice rest on protective legislation, progressive policies, and discourses that promote equality, justice, and freedom of speech and thought, making it possible for dissenting voices to be heard and included (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017). There are also governance systems that promote silence in academia, driven by alt-right, corporate, populist, capitalist, and market ideologies that would like academic insights to align with these hegemonic structures and interests (Küskü et al., 2021). All governance structures have orthodox (inside track) and heterodox (outside track) actors. Governance systems that only listen and operationalise the demands of actors from the inside track fail to foster inclusivity and the diversity of opinions. Collaborative innovation will require the governance systems to bring in dissent by inviting voices from the margins, inviting heterodox outsiders within to become part of the innovation process. The international and national governance of higher education has a duality in supporting voice or silence in academia (Marginson, 2016). To promote interdisciplinary, multiparadigmatic, and inclusive academia, governance systems should bring in dissent, particularly from heterodox perspectives. Such governance structures need to resist populist and alt-right attacks on CSS and bolster the inclusion of these engaged disciplines of social science in mechanisms of law and policymaking in the higher education sector (Giroux, 2014).

Establishing dedicated national social science research agendas would be an alternative way to support CSS on a macro level, safeguarding funding and academic freedom from neoliberal influences (Encel, 1968). Additionally, fostering international collaboration on transnational social policies could create resilient platforms for CSS to address global challenges (Veller et al., 2013), while emphasising evidence-based interdisciplinary approaches would enhance CSS's relevance in policymaking (Hantrais et al., 2015).

Social movements advocating for the integration and support of CSS play a paramount role in this endeavour. Given the societal challenges addressed by CSS, there is an urgent global call for its inclusion in academia and policymaking to harness its potential for societal benefit (Mykhalovskiy et al., 2019). For example, social movements focusing on health equity, climate justice, and human rights can use CSS to put important critiques and different ideas before the prevailing interests (Broom & Adams, 2016; Teixeira & Motta, 2024). From these fields, the movements also need to advocate for embedding CSS in academic work and policy development (Özbilgin et al., 2023). By doing so, they will ensure that CSS continues to serve as an essential component within the academic policy interface, thus further combating silencing mechanisms against CSS and strengthening the ability of CSS to contribute to solving complex issues.

3.2. Meso-Level Collaborative Innovation

In these times of marketisation, individualisation, financialisation, and the deregulation of academia, it is increasingly difficult for higher education institutions to resist and counteract the drive to push out CSS. At the meso-organisational level, universities have been hit with fundamental changes to their structures where finance functions have taken more significant roles than their research and teaching functions (Taberner, 2018). This pattern of over-financialisation has increased and internalised market pressure and populist demands on academic affairs, deteriorating and derailing academic institutions from their original priorities to conduct research and disseminate research through teaching (Giroux, 2014). At the meso level, resisting the purge of CSS will require universities and academic institutions to revisit their priority areas of work, i.e., scientific advancement and positive social, economic, and political impact through research and teaching. As universities operate in the ecosystem of higher education, they are unlikely to resist populist attacks

on CSS if the macro-governance systems operate with populist rationales. However, if the macro-governance systems are more supportive of CSS, universities would have more opportunities to engage in CSS and mobilise its transformative and engaged power to make a positive impact. For example, at the meso level, collective, social, and solidaristic perspectives through studies could be brought back into disciplines of social science.

The performative turn in social sciences could be addressed through an evaluation of CSS in the real and hidden curriculum (Baykut et al., 2022). We suggest the formation of an open curriculum initiative as a method to overcome the silencing of CSS (Fomunyam & Khoza, 2020). An open curriculum offers students the freedom to explore CSS within various disciplinary contexts, ensuring its continued relevance despite institutional constraints. By promoting interdisciplinary exposure to CSS, the open curriculum model counteracts the programmatic closures of critical studies, advocating for an educational framework that values diverse theoretical insights and critical perspectives. For example, in institutions like Brown University (2024), a sociology student interested in science communication might take traditional sociology courses alongside classes in media studies, ethics, and psychology, creating a unique interdisciplinary programme that prepares them for a career in public journalism or public policy. This flexibility encourages students to explore diverse fields, fostering critical thinking and a broader knowledge base tailored to individual aspirations. This collaborative effort would consist of CSS scholars, educators, and practitioners worldwide, co-creating an open-source modular curriculum that spans disciplines. Such an initiative may also counter programmatic closures, related to discipline-specific initiatives. It would show how CSS enhances and interacts with other disciplines. CSS may resist deinstitutionalisation and achieve buy-in as a significant approach if the curriculum might be expanded on with modules outlining the historical and contemporary relevance of CSS, thereby making it more difficult for institutions to rationalise deleting these programmes.

Collaborative innovation in academia holds significant emancipatory potential, fostering resilience against backlash by bridging academic knowledge with real-world application and challenging restrictive norms. Collaborative doctoral programmes exemplify this by linking university research with industry needs, preparing doctoral students for roles that integrate academic and practical expertise, thus resisting academic isolation and creating a supportive, innovation-driven ecosystem (Kitagawa, 2014). Similarly, academia-industry partnerships in technology, where leadership roles rotate based on project needs, demonstrate how adaptive collaboration transcends hierarchical restrictions, empowering both parties to contribute dynamically and resist rigid academic constraints (Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011). For example, in urban planning education, collaborative platforms involving academics, community stakeholders, and practitioners enable transformative learning, promoting sustainable practises, and embedding academic work within societal needs, which bolsters academia's relevance and responsiveness (Čolić et al., 2023). Additionally, collaborative autoethnography among women academics empowers participants to reflect on and disrupt generalised, biased narratives, creating an inclusive, reflective academic culture that resists traditional limitations and supports diverse voices (Anderson et al., 2020). These collaborative practises not only enhance innovation but serve as emancipatory tools, enabling academia to break free from isolating pressures and align more closely with societal progress and inclusion.

In order to further strengthen resistance against the silencing of CSS, scholars may also fashion a web of interlocking organisations, dissemination platforms, and collaborative initiatives that cut across local and international contexts (Medina, 2023). By facilitating the exchange of information, amplifying marginalised voices, and presenting a united public front (Smidt et al., 2021), such networks can neutralise efforts that push back against CSS. Local initiatives, such as community-based research hubs and advocacy organisations,

may reach out to prominent international organisations and academic collectives, enabling universities to pool strategies into common coffers. Additionally, regional centres focusing on urgent social questions may bring local scholars and activists together with international authorities for interdisciplinary work, addressing both local and global social problems and challenges. These centres might incubate original research and activities while providing support and an audience for CSS scholars who might otherwise feel isolated or underfunded at their home institutions (Mykhalovskiy et al., 2019). Moreover, major global platforms might provide channels through which CSS research may reach a broader audience and extend its impact beyond publication. By cultivating these intersections, universities and other academic bodies can create an environment more supportive of CSS resilience. Such networks not only afford protection against localised suppression of CSS but also enable unified responses to global challenges. This collaborative effort underscores the importance of solidarity and cooperation in the face of adversity and emphasises the shared interests within academia (Medina, 2023).

3.3. Micro-Level Collaborative Innovation

At the micro level of collaborative innovation are scholarly behaviours of openness to inclusivity, interdisciplinarity, and multiparadigmatic perspectives. Academic behavioural norms need to transform from exclusivity, ignoring multiparadigmatic and interdisciplinary insights, to more openness towards a wider range of evidence (Broom & Adams, 2016). Internationally, most academics come from atypical and disadvantaged backgrounds and with the richness of disciplinary and paradigmatic diversity, even though academic orthodoxy tends to undervalue such diversity. The potential of the current cohort of scholars from diverse backgrounds and disciplines to foster inclusivity needs support and mobilisation. Hence, such support is essential to identify and utilise the broad range of skills, experiences, and perspectives that CSS scholars bring (Erbil & Özbilgin, 2024), entrenching their legitimacy, relevance, and rigour in academic discourses and practises.

Engaged scholarship at the micro level may resist the silencing of CSS. Ridgeway (2006) suggests that interpersonal relationships and behaviours have the potential to transform institutional structures and cultures over time. By linking theory with practice and involving a diversity of stakeholders, the engaged work and activism of CSS scholars may challenge neoliberalism and populism's tendency to marginalise dissenting views (Özbilgin et al., 2022). This participatory approach confronts the silencing mechanisms that depict CSS as detached or disconnected from real-world problems. Interdisciplinary collaboration at the individual level may further dismantle disciplinary insularity by cultivating spaces where CSS insights mingle with and mould other fields. Such interdisciplinary dialogues aid in legitimising CSS approaches in broader academic circles, confronting attempts to isolate and silence dissenting voices (Jandrić, 2016). By tackling complex societal issues through interdisciplinary lenses, CSS scholars may exhibit the importance of CSS perspectives, resisting endeavours to defund or devalue them.

Scholars could resist the silencing of CSS by engaging in strategic, everyday acts of defiance and adaptation within academic systems. For example, Suopajärvi (2023) details how Finnish social science researchers build informal networks and collective practises of resilience, sharing frustrations with neoliberal pressures and exchanging strategies to preserve critical inquiry in their work environments. Piven (2010) also describes how some scholars adopt dual roles as both academics and activists, leveraging their research to advocate for social justice while influencing public discourse and policy. These practises highlight how critical scholars can subtly navigate institutional constraints to maintain the integrity of CSS and engage meaningfully with broader societal issues.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the silencing mechanisms targeting CSS in academia and identified three silencing mechanisms that underpin the purge of CSS at a global scale. First, we demonstrated how the deinstitutionalisation of CSS serves as a silencing mechanism. Second, we revealed how disciplinary closure undermines CSS, presenting another silencing mechanism. Third, we showed that populist and libertarian attacks on CSS are also a silencing mechanism. We explained each of these silencing mechanisms with international examples, illustrating the global relevance of these silencing mechanisms. The concurrent operation of these three silencing mechanisms in science leads to the marginalisation of unorthodox views in academia. The urgency to address silencing mechanisms arises from the inalienable and global human rights and freedoms of individuals both in and outside academia to live free from discrimination, marginalisation, and with equal choices and chances. We proposed collaborative innovation as a theoretical framework for resistance, advocating for multilevel, inclusive collaboration among diverse actors. This approach fosters interdisciplinary knowledge production, enhances CSS's academic legitimacy, and strengthens collective resistance against forces undermining academic freedom, inclusion, and social progress. Drawing on collaborative innovation ideas, we presented macro, meso and micro-level interventions and transformative changes that can counteract attacks on CSS and help academic institutions to protect and mobilise the progressive impact that CSS promises to deliver.

This paper extends theoretical discourse on the resilience of CSS by introducing collaborative innovation as a strategic resistance framework against silencing mechanisms. It theorises collaborative innovation as a multilevel approach that bridges macro, meso, and micro-levels, aligning various stakeholders across governance, institutional, and individual dimensions. This expansion positions collaborative innovation as a transformative mechanism that reinforces inclusivity, interdisciplinary exchange, and multiparadigmatic collaboration, thus empowering CSS to challenge hegemonic structures. By framing collaboration as both an inclusive design and a solidarity-based practice, this paper offers a novel lens through which academia can combat populist, neoliberal, and disciplinary restrictions on critical scholarship.

Silencing mechanisms that we identified in this paper not only threaten CSS but also undermine the very foundations of academic freedom and diversity. This is damaging because it creates a space in which specific forms of knowledge production become more valuable than others, restricting the range of academic discourse and making universities less able to respond to complex social problems. The trend is alarming, given the need for interdisciplinary, critical perspectives and collaborative efforts on global human and non-human rights challenges (Erbil & Belbağ, 2024; Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021b). In other words, the marginalisation of CSS is also symptomatic of a more significant crisis in higher education to contribute effectively both towards its broader social mission and advancing public conversation/critique, which can inform policymaking.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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