

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.2042>

Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, Duke University Press, 2021,  
359 pp.: ISBN: 978-1-4780-1771-4

Reviewed by NINA PERGER<sup>1</sup>

When Bourdieu embarks on objectifying and analysing a world that tends to objectify and analyse others while refraining from and being resistant to objectifying itself – the academic field, the institution of the university – he immediately states that the title of his work *Homo academicus* might just as well be *A Book for Burning* (1988, p. 5). Delving into “native sorcery” rather than engaging in the usual objectification of distant others – with the increasing distance often being accompanied by an increasing (but sometimes false) intellectual revolutionary spirit, which exposes all of the other’s wrongs in the name of “intellectual rights” – one “must expect to see turned against him the violence he has unleashed” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 5). Even if Sara Ahmed’s latest work, *Complaint!*, has not unleashed a counter-reaction to the degree of Bourdieu’s *Homo academicus*, it does speak about the violence unleashed against those who dare to question and expose the “native sorcery” of the field of higher education. It achieves this by focusing on harassment and bullying within the field and exposing higher educational institutions, their well-oiled machinery of reproduction and their institutional failure to address harassment and bullying effectively.

Bourdieu highlights the kind of reading he encourages when readers pick up *Homo academicus*, a reading that does not explain away all of the institutional wrongs as belonging strictly to *homo academicus gallicus*, but which is capable of identifying and taking seriously the invariants and homologies of the field that transcend the particularities of national contexts. The very same kind of reading should be encouraged when approaching *Complaint!*. Although the data on which Ahmed grounds her analysis are mostly from the UK context, its reach is broader. Additionally, it would be too narrow to limit the scope of



<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia; [nina.perger@fdv.uni-lj.si](mailto:nina.perger@fdv.uni-lj.si).

*Complaint!* to a study of *homo academicus masculinus*, not only because the work encompasses broader (including racialised) power dynamics within the field, but also because, as with Bourdieu's analysis, *Complaint!* speaks of the field of higher education as embedded in the social universe as such.

Despite the agents of higher education having a tendency to perceive themselves as above and beyond the mundaneness and mess of the social and its many struggles, the field of higher education is – whether acknowledged and addressed or not – placed at the heart of many contemporary socio-political struggles. Contemporary challenges come not only from the forces of neoliberalisation, but also in the shape of anti-democratic forces, as thematised by, for example, Brown (2023), with these forces tending to take a new form of the old issue of (state) anti-intellectualism (see, for example, Scott 2019; Fassin 2024). However, *Complaint!* also testifies to the fact that higher education is far from being invulnerable to challenges from within the field.

Throughout her work – not only in her focus on harassment and bullying as evident in *Complaint!*, but also in her previous work on diversity and its institutional life (2012), and on the uses of use (2019, see particularly the chapter on use and the university) – Ahmed shows how the notion of “institutional as usual” (2019, p. 170) itself presents a threat in relation to the free “university spirit, the spirit of inquiry and expression of truth”, as put forward by Dewey at the beginning of twentieth century (1902, p. 14). Dewey bets on the scientific community, albeit within the context of protecting academic freedom: “No fact is more significant than the growing inclination on the part of scientific associations to assume a right and duty to inquire into what affects the welfare of its own line of inquiry, however and wherever it takes place” (1902, p. 12). If we take seriously the “institutional as usual” as discussed by Ahmed, this appears to be overly optimistic.

In *Complaint!*, Ahmed continues the work developed in her discussion on diversity in *On Being Included* (2012) and extends her discussion of *complaint* and the figure of the *complainer* presented in *What's the Use?* (2019). With *Complaint!*, she continues to work on the figure of the *complainer* and extends its reach by putting it to use in the context of harassment within the field of higher education. Yet, *Complaint!* is not a work on harassment and bullying as much as a work on institutional failures to take complaints and complainers seriously; it is a work on how complainers become a problem for the “institutional as usual” (2019, p. 170).

Grounding her work on interviews with forty students, academics, researchers and administrators – those who have complained, those who have been involved in formal complaint procedures, and those who have thought

about complaining but refrained from doing so – Ahmed’s main question in *Complaint!* is “what happens to those who complain and what happens to a complaint” (p. 8). In order to gain insight into the fate of complaints and complainers, Ahmed relies on the concept of “institutional mechanics”, tracing how institutions work, a concept that she had already started to develop in her previous work (see 2012 and 2019) and that she briefly refers to in the first part of *Complaint!*. In this part, she turns her attention to “non-performativity” (p. 28), the gap between what the institution should (formally) do when faced with a complaint and what it actually does (or fails to do). In this sense, “the world of non-performative” is, as Ahmed states, “the world of the *as if*: papers keep circulating as if they matter in a certain way, even when they do not” (2021, p. 52), failing to bring into being what they claim to.

This part of the analysis is especially relevant, considering that institutions, including those of higher education, have a particular investment in reaping the benefits of appearing inclusive, diverse and attentive to abuses of power, as these appearances represent a particular kind of institutional symbolic capital. However, as Ahmed shows by approaching this kind of institutional “ticking the boxes” as non-performatives, the papers, procedures and institutional obligations to address abuses of power can coexist with “institutional as usual”, that is, without fundamentally altering the institution’s existing and normalised power dynamics, while promising to do so in the very same gesture. Institutions have ways of securing the ways of thinking and doing (see, for example, Douglas 1986); these have been thoroughly discussed in the field of sociology, including by Bourdieu. Ahmed tackles this issue in the second chapter, *On Being Stopped*, where she accounts for how complaints are stopped, either with the help of *warnings* (think about your career!), *nods* (saying yes at the very same moment as saying no), *venting* and *blinking* (saying neither yes or no) or *strategic inefficiency*. The latter stands not only for how things fail to work, but also for how things work precisely in the way they *should*, that is, with inefficiency being a key institutional reason for *not* taking up complaints.

In the second part, Ahmed turns her attention to the immanence of complaint, grounding the analysis in the aspect of temporality, emphasising the presence – the *now* – of the complaint as being a matter of the past (p. 102). In this sense, she frames the making of a complaint as a matter of a snap, a break from the institutional as usual, which enables the complainer to acknowledge the usual doings of the institution as *wrongdoings*. Put differently, and as already thematised by Mary Douglas in her seminal work on *how institutions think* (1986, pp. 112–113), a break with the naturalised “categories of [institutional] thought”, institutional fixing of identities and institutional terms for agents’

self-knowledge is needed for the possibility of a complaint to even emerge. The forming of complaints – problematising how institutions “think and do” – exposes the way complainers are framed as a *problem*, as a case of institutional “sacrilege”. This act of “sacrilege” rouses institutional forces – the very same ones that the complaint is about – into their defence against those who dare to expose the naturalised ways of institutional doing and thinking: “institutions will be institutions!”, “procedures will be procedures” (Ahmed 2021, p. 73; see also Douglas, 1986, p. 113).

This takes us back to Ahmed’s well-known previous discussions of wilful subjects (2014), particularly the figure of a (feminist) killjoy, showing once again how identifying with “the rod” (2021, p. 208) might hold the (institutional) doors open, and how the doors might be (and are) closed for rocking the institutional boat (2021, p. 239). Similar to other injunctions that seek to be fatalistic (“boys will be boys”, etc.), the slogan “institutions will be institutions!” tends to induce habituation and resignation to the ways *things just are*, the very same habituation for *things to remain just as they are*.

Yet, Ahmed’s *Complaint!* – as already evident in her previous work, in which killjoys stubbornly exist and persist – does not stop at analysing what happens to the complainers and complaints. In this context, we can follow how her conceptual tools, figures and metaphors continue to travel around in her oeuvre, from one setting to another. In her previous work, readers have already met the figures and metaphors of killjoys, the rod, and the stubborn arms and hands reaching out of the ground. As Ahmed concludes in her work on wilful subjects: “Willful parts: hands which are not hand. This book has been full of such parts, wayward parts: parts that will not budge, that refuse to participate, parts that keep coming up, when they are not even supposed to be” (2014, p. 194). Throughout *Complaint!*, these parts continue to persist and come up in Ahmed’s explicit discussion on the role of *complaint collectives*, treating the complaint itself as another arm “still rising, still coming out of the ground, not yet done, not yet beaten” (2021, p. 276). In this sense, *Complaint!* also calls for transforming institutions and resisting their naturalised and normalised inheritance by demanding that they and their agents put into practice what they are promising on paper.

From the perspective of delving into the “native sorcery” of higher education institutions (Bourdieu 1988, p. 5), which should be kept hidden in order to remain normalised and naturalised, as well as from the perspective of the “sacrilege” of speaking of the unspeakable – of power dynamics and their abuses within a field that puts immense effort into appearing *disinterested* in power – *Complaint!* represents a tool for potential liberty, as Bourdieu also proposes

in relation to his work on *homo academicus* (1988, p. 5). As overly optimistic as Dewey's bet on scientific community appears to be, it is – in the sense of university institutions doings and thinking *differently* – also a necessary wager. However, this wager can only be waged, as Ahmed (2021) emphasises, *collectively*.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2014). *Willful subjects*. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2019). *What's the use? On the uses of use*. Duke University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus*. Stanford University Press.
- Brown, W. (2023). *Nihilistic times: Thinking with Max Weber*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1902). Academic freedom. *Educational review*, 23(14), 1–14.
- Douglas, M. (1986). *How institutions think. The Frank W. Abrams Lectures*. Syracuse University Press.
- Fassin, É. (2024). *State anti-intellectualism & the politics of gender and race: Illiberal France and beyond*. Central European University Press.
- Scott, J. W. (2019). *Knowledge, power, and academic freedom*. Columbia University Press.