

The contentious politics of academic freedom

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Contested definition of academic freedom

- Freedom of teaching: what and how to teach and assess
- Freedom of research: what and how to research

But also

- Extramural freedom: on expertise and outside of expertise
- Right of the students not to be indoctrinated
- Labour right

Against academic freedom

- Restriction of protest rights on campus
- Restriction on what to teach and how
- Attacks on specific disciplines

Imposed through

- Defunding
- expulsion

Recent cases at Columbia university

On 4 March 2025, the day of his inaugural speech to Congress, President Donald Trump posted a statement on Truth Social: “All Federal Funding will STOP for any College, School or University that allows illegal protests. Agitators will be imprisoned/or permanently sent back to the country from which they came. American students will be permanently expelled or, depending on the crime, arrested. NO MASKS!”. A few days later, on 10 March, a student activist named **Mahmoud Khalil**, who had served as a lead negotiator for the Gaza solidarity encampment at Columbia University was abducted by ICE on the grounds of Columbia University, without any specific charges being made against him

Beyond Columbia

- As Trump wrote, “Following my previously signed Executive Orders, ICE proudly apprehended and detained **Mahmoud Khalil**, a Radical Foreign pro-Hamas Student on the campus of Columbia University. This is the first arrest of many to come. We know there are more students at Columbia and other Universities along the Country who have engaged in pro-terrorist, anti-semitic, anti-American activities and the Trump Administration will not tolerate it”.
- On the day of Khalil’s abduction, the Education Department sent letters to 60 US universities, including Columbia, Harvard and Yale, threatening them with cuts in federal funding if they did not address allegations of anti-Semitism on campus

Mechanisms of repression

- In the meanwhile, on the 13th, the Trump administration sent a letter with a required a list of policy changes for Columbia University in order to restore the \$400 million cut from the federal funding and maintain a “continued financial relationship.” Among the nine bullet point requests, to be met by March 2 in order for negotiations to be opened, are: “the abolition of the University Judicial Board, the implementation of a mask ban, and the granting of ‘full law enforcement authority, including arrest and removal of agitators’ to public safety officers”.
- requires the university to “complete disciplinary proceedings for students involved in the April 2024 Gaza Solidarity camp
- that Columbia Public Safety officers have “full law enforcement authority, including arrest and removal of agitators
- “Compliance would also require that the University begin the process of placing the Middle East, South Asian, and African studies department under academic receivership—a process that requires an outside chair to run the department—for a minimum of five years.
- , “It further demands the implementation of ‘time, place, and manner rules,’ including a ‘plan to hold all student groups accountable,’ and ‘a plan for comprehensive admissions reform’” as well as “the adoption and promotion of a formal definition of antisemitism”.

Attacking academic freedom in Germany

- A most telling example is a court case was brought by Hage against his dismissal from the Max Planck Society.
- The court decision points first at the importance of the exchange with Israel for the MPS: “The purpose of the defendant is to promote science. This statutory purpose is realized in particular by maintaining research institutes. One of these institutes is the Max Planck Institute for Ethnological Research. The defendant attaches great importance to close cooperation with partners from Israel, the world's leading science and research nation. Its institutes maintain more than 90 collaborations with six universities, the Weizmann Institute of Science (WIS) and other Israeli state research institutions. concern The close relations between the defendant and Israel are based on decades of exchange” (Court of Halle 2024).

The post

“There are, of course, those of us who, despite our rejection of the Zionist ethno-nationalist project, were able to mourn the victims of the Hamas murders from the comfort of our social and geographic position and because of our pluralistic affiliation. Yet we were not able to share our grief in the way they were mourned by the Israelis and their Western allies. For as the Israeli massacre of Palestinians quickly began to dwarf the Hamas massacre in its scale and in its racist devaluation of those killed, it became clear that this was no ordinary mourning for the dead. It was a supremacist mourning”.

The court decision

- The court states that “Both the description of a state recognized under international law as a "racist undertaking" and the labeling as a Zionist ethno-nationalist "project" are blatantly anti-Semitic, as these terms deny Israel's statehood recognized under international law”
- so that with his conduct, Hage “has breached the duties incumbent upon him under his employment contract”, that included “to take into account the legitimate interests of the employer outside of working hours”.

The defunding scandal

- The repressive strategy related with defunding open is illustrated by the Federal ministry reaction to an open letter of academics in support of the students of the Free University in Berlin whose pro-Palestine encampment had been violently cleared by the Police. Immediately, the then Federal Minister of Education and Research, Bettina Stark Watzinger, accused the signatories of the open letter of having positioned themselves against the constitution: "This statement from lecturers at Berlin universities is staggering. Instead of taking a clear stand against hatred of Israel and Jews, university squatters are being turned into victims and violence is being trivialized." plus: doublechecking possibility to withdraw research funds

Disciplining through parliamentary resolution

“Freedom of thought must be guaranteed at universities. Article 5 of the Basic Law guarantees academic freedom with constitutional status. This must also apply without restriction to teaching staff and students with Jewish roots, of Israeli origin or with an Israeli solidarity mindset. Our universities must be safe places for these students and teachers. The proper organisation of events must be guaranteed. Anti-Semitic behaviour must have consequences. Schools and universities must therefore be supported in continuing to make use of their legal options or to implement corresponding options. This includes the application of domiciliary rights, exclusion from lessons or studies and even de-registration in particularly serious cases. It would be helpful to include the fight against anti-Semitism in particular in the relevant curricula of degree programmes, to qualify teaching staff accordingly and to appoint anti-Semitism officers at universities across the board.”

Caveats: freedom?

Authoritarian backlash

- Humbolt's definition and extramural freedom as linked to general authoritarian backlash
- The war on academic fields
- Definition of individual freedom as ambivalent
- Not an absolute freedom: disciplines and disciplining
- Distinguishing university autonomy and freedom within academia

Caveats: academic?

- Neoliberal university as
 - Labour precarity
 - Commodification of universities as for profit
 - Competition between universities and depolitization
 - Private and public funds
 - Students as costumers