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Four Reasons Why We Need to Rethink Academic Freedom in Europe

VB verfassungsblog.de/defending-plurality/

Karsten Schubert

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Defending Plurality

Academic freedom is under attack, both in authoritarian democracies, such as Hungary and Turkey, and in liberal Western democracies, such as the United States, the UK, France and Germany. For example, Gender Studies are being targeted by right-wing governments in Eastern Europe, and in France President Emmanuel Macron has attacked post-colonial and critical theories as “Islamogauchisme”, portraying them as a danger to the Republic. However, dominant discourses about academic freedom and free speech in the global north, lately especially in France and Germany, focus on an alleged threat to academic freedom through “political correctness” and “cancel culture”, that, under scrutiny, often turn out to be exactly the opposite, namely defences of plurality and critical voices.

1. Threats to academic freedom from inside and outside of Universities

Western discourse on academic freedom focuses on perceived threats to it from within academia itself. “Cancel culture”, “political correctness” and “wokeness” are concepts that point to a perceived narrowing of discursive rules within academia through leftist “politicised” or “moralised” scholarship and public debate. It is also important to note that protests that seem external to academic discourse at first sight, such as student boycotts of events involving right-wing or racist speakers, are making their cases guided by academic theories, and thereby are not fully external to academia, but rather part of critical academic culture. What is perceived as a threat to academic freedom in this Western discourse is, therefore, the learning and research progress that takes place within academia regarding structural discriminations, such as racism, sexism and homophobia.

External restrictions on academic freedom come from non-academic protest, on the one hand, as in post-truth discourses of climate change or Covid-19 denial, and from conservative and right-wing governments, on the other. In Western debates, restrictions on academic freedom by the state are often “othered”, meaning that they are attributed solely to far away authoritarian regimes. State interference in Hungary (here and here) and Turkey is rightfully seen as a scandal. However, the myopic Western discourse about “cancel culture” that displays critical academic theories as the main threat to academic freedom fails to recognise that in the West, a new era of dangerous state interventions has also just begun. Disturbing examples of such state interventions into academic discourses are the French government’s employment of the right-wing term “Islamogauchisme”

[[conservative position](#)] to interfere in academic discourse, as well as the attempts to silence anti-racist and postcolonial thought by politicians at different levels in the [UK](#) and the [US](#). In the US, such state attacks on academic freedom intensified over the last years through republican campaigns against state universities that depend on public funding [[here](#) and [here](#)]. Another example is the [anti-BDS resolution of the German parliament](#) and the subsequent decision by the [German Rectors' Conference](#) to mainstream it in German universities. It is these state interventions, and not the evolving academic discussion and learning process concerning structural discrimination, such as racism, that are the real threat to academic freedom.

2. Academic freedom is political

So we need to fight for academic freedom as a realm for open debate that is not politically pre-determined. Yet, is it really possible to work with such a politically neutral account of academic freedom? As the one-sided attacks on critical theories under the guise of defending academic freedom indicate, questions of academic freedom are political, and increasingly politicised. The success of right-wing populists around the world has led to open political battles regarding truth and knowledge production. While the intrinsic connection between knowledge and political power is well documented by [political theorists](#), the dimensions and straightforwardness in which knowledge and truth, and with it academia, are part of political contestations today is an intensification. Therefore, we cannot hold onto a purely formal, neutral or objective understanding of academic freedom. Defending academic freedom without contextualising and localising such defences in the broader political landscape of knowledge-contests is empty and risks unintentional political side-effects. That is to say, joining the concert of concerns about restrictive “political correctness” in the name of free speech, such as the [Harper's Letter on justice and open debate](#), risks supporting right-wing narratives. When academic theories are themselves the object of a general public debate fostered by right-wing forces, there is no innocent defence of academic freedom. A position on academic freedom is a position within these political debates. What is worse, formalisation and objectification are often intentionally used in the [right-wing and conservative discourse on “cancel culture”](#) to wrongly universalise one's own particular political position for defending unjustified privileges against social justice critiques.

3. Correcting the limitations on academic freedom requires changing systems of privilege

If academic freedom is a political issue, does this lead to a reduction of science to political power? Luckily not, as there are plausible academic theories to make sense of this situation. Michel Foucault, feminist and postcolonial standpoint theories, and radical democratic theories all show that academic discourse cannot be politically neutral but is, as a whole, a reflection of current societal power structures and political hegemonies. And this is a serious problem for academic freedom. Access to academia, mainstream topics and funding structures all privilege hegemonic perspectives and researchers from specific backgrounds. Academia, in the West, is still [White, cis-male](#), straight and upper-middle class. Diverse and pluralistic perspectives, especially those that research the fundamental

power-asymmetries and structures of oppression and exploitation on which our societies are built, are effectively “cancelled” from the outset. Correcting these limitations on academic freedom to foster a more pluralist and inclusive discourse requires changing these systems of privilege. It means that the currently privileged lose discursive power, air-time, or funding. The pluralisation of academia makes it necessary to redistribute resources so that the freedom of the currently privileged is reduced in order to establish freedom for all. This can be done by the techniques that are criticised as “political correctness”: decolonizing syllabi, systematically privileging minority voices through inclusive conferences, or implementing inclusive language and employment policies at universities.

This, however, does not limit academic freedom or freedom of expression, as do the external and state driven interventions that I have described above. To think that change will not redistribute power is to employ a wrong conception of freedom, and it is an equally wrong conception of academia that permits the fending off of progress in order to protect individual privileges. Such conservative defences of academic freedom lead to the continuity of mainstream academia’s blindness towards social and political realities. Therefore, challenging social power structures within academia is not about reducing academia to power struggles, but, on the contrary, is to work towards the ideal of free academic discourse.

4. But... beware of the administrators and market-driven university management

Be all that as it may, is there not a problem with moralisation limiting academic freedom nevertheless? While the real threat, and the “real cancel culture”, is the state interference described above, we need to take seriously the examples given by the conservative “cancel culture” critique. A comparative view helps. The examples are mostly from private universities in the U.S., where students pay enormous tuition and have the role of consumers and customers. Here, overblown administrations do everything they can to keep scandals under the radar or solve them according to the perceived wishes of the customer. Furthermore, the absence of effective labour rights makes firing people easy. In this situation, the position of faculty who teach controversial material is weak and colleagues from the US report a heightened awareness with regards to “political correctness”. Indeed, while this awareness is generally a good thing, potential self-censorship or the danger of inappropriate sanctions are not, as they can limit academic freedom. From this some institutional conclusions can be inferred: the redistribution of privilege within academia for the pluralisation of academic discourse should not be in the hands of administrators and should not be guided by market rationales, such as in the US administrative logic. Precarious academic employment, especially of younger scholars, is not specific to the US, but a general threat to academic freedom. For example, in Germany, 90 per cent of academic personnel work under short fixed-term contracts without any long-term job security, while only senior professors are permanently employed. This neoliberal management effectively limits the options for younger scholars to voice critical positions and challenge established paradigms, minimizing innovation and stabilising structures of unjust privilege. Therefore, in addition to fending off the

conservative attacks on academic freedom through the state, key to the pluralisation of knowledge and the realisation of academic freedom are better and safer working conditions for scholars.

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Editor's note: Some corrections were made after the text was first published.

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