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Knowledge production at a crossroads: rising antidemocracy and diminishing academic freedom

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ABSTRACT
This essay links the global shift toward antidemocracy with the global attack on higher education. I argue that rising far-right politics in many countries is also politicizing higher education, in turn diminishing the freedom to research, think and teach. This is apparent across Europe, the Americas, Middle East, Asia, Africa and among supposedly leading liberal democracies such as the United States. A common strategy in far-right attacks on higher education has been to limit scholars’ claim to collective institutional autonomy and reduce scholarly conversation to an individual’s right to free speech. The new UK Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 illustrates this reductionism explicitly. To counter this trend, I argue for reframing academic freedom as social responsibility to wider societies, underscoring its collective dimensions and legibility and applicability to nonacademic audiences. This reframing is particularly important in global north countries given the dominance of the Euro-American academy in knowledge production, and the relative power of western scholars to push back against intellectual censorship. Drawing on the recent wave of political activism across social movements and union mobilization in the United States, I argue this presents an opportunity for connecting the defense of higher education with the defense of wider concerns around issues such as the climate crisis, labor conditions, anti-racism, conflict and abortion rights. I conclude that shifting the narrative about academic freedom is essential for building transnational support across class, race, ethnic, religious, gender and educational differences, and resisting escalating attacks on universities and colleges around the world.

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Introduction
Attacks by extremist political leaders on higher education in general, and academic freedom in particular, have dramatically escalated over the past decade (Douglass 2021; Ignatieff and Roch 2018; Scholars at Risk 2023; V-Dem 2022). Hostility toward faculty and students is happening in both the global south and global north, and across a variety of far-right (and a few far-left), anti-democratic regimes that range from explicit autocracies to more liberal democracies include the United States. A common strategy in the political attacks on higher education has been to limit institutional autonomy and reduce scholarship as equivalent to an individual’s right to free speech.

In this essay, I argue that attacks on higher education should be understood as part of a global pattern of rising antidemocracy and a drift toward authoritarianism that marks the twenty-first century as historically unique. Across the global south and global north, there has been a significant
decline in democracy in recent years and a correlative marked rise in extremist political parties and regimes. Today, according to V-Dem, a Swedish-based watchdog organization that charts indicators of democratic governance, approximately 70 per cent of the world’s populations live under dictatorships (V-Dem 2022). Common to these antidemocratic regimes is the targeting of universities and colleges and controlling what is taught to students. Far-right leaders are keen to prevent universities from becoming sites of political activism that challenge national policies and practices and question their authority to govern.

In an effort to push back against this global trend, this essay argues for reframing academic freedom as a social responsibility to wider societies, underscoring that attacks on scholars are not just a matter of concern for those working and learning within the academy. Putting this differently, thinking about academic freedom in terms of collective social responsibility – rather than being reduced to an individual’s right to free speech – presents a more generalizable concept of academic freedom legible to nonacademic audiences. This reframing avoids getting bogged down in detailed legal and constitutional debates about what constitutes free speech that varies across national contexts. And, importantly, it overcomes the methodological nationalism that continues to dominate studies about higher education (Shahjahan and Grimm 2023; Shahjahan and Kezar 2013). My general argument is that today we are facing an unprecedented global wave of antidemocracy and that universities in the global north cannot abdicate their social responsibility to wider societies. This is particularly important given the outsized dominance of the Euro-American academy in global knowledge production (Altbach et al. 2019; de Wit 2019; Kamola 2019), and the relative power of scholars in the United States and other western countries to push back against worldwide intellectual censorship (Altbach and Blanco 2024).

In what follows, I first discuss the global attacks on universities and colleges as part of a wider set of policing logics that seek to quell critical thought and faculty and student challenges to antidemocratic governance. This discussion draws inspiration from the emerging work of scholars calling for the ‘new geopolitics of higher education’ (Moscovitz and Sabzalieva 2023). I then turn to attacks on academic freedom in the United States and other liberal democratic countries. Specifically, I explore far-right strategies that reduce academic freedom to the right to free speech – an equivalence that is false and misleading. Clarifying this distinction is essential to transcend distracting (and often disingenuous) debates over whether one person’s perspective is more worthy of academic protection than another person’s perspective. In the second part of the essay, I turn to the United States to explore why reframing academic freedom as a social responsibility is necessary given the general apathy about attacks on academic freedom in that country. I argue that in times of mounting antidemocracy, there is an urgent need for reconnecting the defense of higher education with the defense of wider collective concerns around the climate crisis, labor conditions, systemic racism, anti-immigration, LGBTQ+ issues and reproductive rights. I conclude that reframing academic freedom as social responsibility – and making it legible to diverse groups within and beyond the academy – helps build transnational support that is essential for resisting escalating worldwide repression of scholars and students.

**Global policing of universities and colleges**

In 2023 the assault on higher education around the world reached an unprecedented scale. According to the report Free to Think published by Scholars at Risk (SAR), a New York-based nonprofit organization, there were 409 attacks on 66 higher education institutions between July 2022-June 2023 (SAR 2023). These attacks included nearly 200 killings, violent assaults and disappearances of scholars and students in a range of countries including Pakistan, Syria, India, Hungary, Philippines and Turkey. Notably, the report also stated that in richer countries of the global north, such as Australia, Japan and the United States, there is less direct violence but there is still a ‘spread of illiberalism’ that threatens public education and wider values of democracy (SAR 2023, 3–4) (Figure 1).
The correlation between attacks on academic freedom and the undermining of democratic principles highlights the importance of open educational systems. According to analysts, when academic freedom is infringed there is always a rise in antidemocratic governance. This includes such things as limiting electoral rights, reducing the independence of judges, and censoring mainstream journalists and news media. Legal scholar Michael Lynk argues that the statistics published by watchdog groups such as SAR and V-Dem connect declining academic freedom to rising anti-democratic societies and can be measured in terms of political rights and civil liberties.\footnote{Lynk, ‘There is an exact parallel between the rise of illiberal democracy and authoritarian governments and the crackdown on academic freedom and the independence and autonomy of universities’. He goes on, ‘they go hand in hand’, and declining academic freedom is one of the most reliable indicators for determining ‘how much respect or how little respect there is for democracy and the rule of law’ (cited in Lorinc 2023).}

What are the structural factors driving these interconnected trends of rising antidemocracy and diminishing academic freedom? According to the World Bank’s semiannual Global Economic Prospects report, economic growth is projected to slow throughout 2024 due to uncertainty about wars in Ukraine and Gaza, a declining Chinese economy, and rising natural disasters and risks related to the climate crisis.\footnote{Indicators of a stalling global political economy, as well as unprecedented levels of inequality and poverty within and across many countries and regions of the world, is stoking a general panic. Strongmen extremists are taking advantage of this pervasive anxiety, pushing ultranationalist ideologies that often promise a return to romanticized better times with campaign slogans such as ‘Make America Great Again’, ‘Make Poland Great Again’ and ‘Make India Great Again’. However, once in office these antidemocratic leaders typically aggravate societal inequalities through defunding social services, public health and public education and deregulating corporate accountability. The election of far-right populist Javier Milei to presidency in Argentina in late 2023, who promptly crashed the national economy and introduced aggressive austerity measures that incited a nationwide general strike in early 2024, is an extreme example of this cycle.}

Against this backdrop of general anxiety about national identities, economic instability and the planet’s future, millions of people have taken to the streets to protest and express their fears and frustrations. Some protest the anti-climate policies of their governments, others protest wars and
regional conflicts, others protest racism and militarized police, and many others protest discriminatory labor and health conditions. Far-right leaders have become intolerant of growing public dissent and political protest. According to the Civicus Monitor (a global civil society alliance that for over two decades has been tracking restrictions on public protests), excessive force and detentions of those marching in the streets are escalating.\textsuperscript{3} It found that in 2022, the right to peacefully protest, which is protected under international law, has been violated in over 75\% of countries where protests took place. Many antidemocratic governments are using lawfare strategies that include the ‘over-criminalization’ of targeted groups and activists. This entails laws and policies that label public protests as ‘riots’ and dissenters as ‘terrorists’ who are heavily penalized and even incarcerated for their behavior. Disturbingly, the rise of anti-protest laws has escalated in overtly authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia and in more liberal democratic societies such as Britain, Australia, Germany, France, Italy and the United States (Terwindt 2020; Weis 2022).

William Robinson in his compelling book \textit{The Global Police State} describes the global political economy as ‘out-of-control’ (Robinson 2020, 6). As he explains, the destabilization of the global political economy is both the cause and consequence of massive economic inequalities, in turn creating the conditions in which strongmen autocrats appear attractive to many people. And once in power, antidemocratic leaders (and the capitalist elites in finance, energy, defense and technology sectors that bankroll their political careers) are deeply concerned about minimizing further disruptions to the global economy. Robinson argues that as many millions of poor and oppressed people take to the streets to demonstrate against social and political injustice and lack of jobs and opportunities, the transnational capitalist class is forced ‘to impose increasingly coercive and repressive forms of rule’ (Robinson 2020, 5).

While Robinson does not mention the global assault on higher education as part of these oppressive political strategies, I argue that attacking universities should be understood in this wider context of ‘policing logics’ that reflect global economic destabilization and realignments of political power (Darian-Smith 2025, in press). This is why antidemocratic governments are using heavy-handed policing to quell faculty and student political protests that have erupted across campuses around the world. In short, universities are being weaponized to serve the intertwined interests of authoritarian leaders and multinational corporations at both national and international levels. This line of thought aligns with Henry Giroux, cultural critic and public intellectual, who states:

\begin{quote}
Across the globe, a new historical conjuncture is emerging in which attacks on higher education as a democratic institution and on dissident public voices in general – whether journalists, whistleblowers, or academics – are intensifying with alarming consequences for both higher education and the formative public spheres that make democracy possible. Hyper-capitalism or market fundamentalism has put higher education in its cross hairs and the result has been the ongoing transformation of higher education into an adjunct of the very rich and powerful corporate interests … In fact, the right-wing defense of the neoliberal dismantling of the university as a site of critical inquiry is more brazen and arrogant than anything we have seen in the past. (Giroux 2016)
\end{quote}

Turkey provides a notable example of the brutal assault on higher education that forced scholars and students to flee for their lives. Far-right president Recep Erdoğan, who came into power in 2014, systematically dismantled Turkey’s higher education sector over the past decade. Against Erdoğan’s attacks on Boğaziçi University in 2021, an international solidarity movement was formed with 2,340 academics from 50 countries signing a joint statement demanding academic freedom and university autonomy. Demonstrations were held on and off campus objecting to political interference in research and teaching (Figure 2). Ultimately, however, such efforts could not stop Erdoğan appointing new administrators and effectively gutting the university, forcing many scholars to leave the country (Doğan and Selenica 2022; Özdemir et al 2019; Vatansever 2020). Under such extreme authoritarian conditions, Dr. Zeynep Gambetti, a professor of political theory at Boğaziçi University from 2000 to 2019, writes that we must:
rethink the role of intellectuals in dark times. The ivory tower has collapsed. We can no longer claim to be outside the political field … Given the material and structural conditions of post-truth, constituting a new regime of truth, one that is inclusive and collective, calls for the labor of commoning. (Gambetti 2022, 186)

In our rising post-truth antidemocratic era, fueled by AI and social media conspiracy theories, defending the freedom to think could not be more important. As argued by education experts Philip Altbach and Gerardo Blanco, ‘Academic leaders will need courage and coordination, and will need to act in solidarity with other institutions – or they will risk their universities becoming the next victim when it might be too late to take action’ (Altbach and Blanco 2024). Adds Henry Giroux, ‘The road to authoritarianism begins when societies stop questioning themselves and when such questioning stops, it is often because intellectuals either have become complicit with such silence or actively produce it’ (Giroux and Bosio 2021, 11). Failure by university presidents, academic staff and students to speak out against far-right attacks means that university autonomy and faculty-led governance, the foundations of academic freedom, will most likely continue to be steadily undermined around the world.

Indifference to attacks on academic freedom in the United States and elsewhere

In the United States – and in contrast to public agitation around the suppression of academic freedom in places such as Hong Kong, India and Hungary – the response to attacks on higher education on and off campus is largely indifference. Some people working within universities are clearly alarmed, particularly in Republican-led states such as Texas and Florida where legislation against university autonomy and academic freedom has been most pronounced. However, for a variety of reasons the majority of faculty are not explicitly outspoken or seemingly alarmed.

Figure 2.

Within elite universities, only some faculty have voiced concern, and these tend to be by scholars in law, humanities and the social sciences whose work engages issues such as political rights, inequality and racial discrimination. Among the broader faculty, there is widespread silence, if not apathy, which is furthered by the dominance of STEM research and the institutional cover provided to scholars in the physical sciences who supposedly do apolitical research and teaching. Beyond elite research universities, in the many thousands of so-called second-tier colleges, concerns over academic freedom are typically not deemed a high priority. These institutions tend to be focused on threatened budget cuts, student enrollment numbers, faculty job security and layoffs of adjunct lecturers. Among students, there is a focus on the cost of tuition and widespread mental health issues, many related to the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. It’s not that issues of financial insecurity and precarity among faculty and students are unconnected to the far-right’s assault on public education, but rather that many people’s priorities are more materially immediate.

Widespread societal apathy toward encroachments on academic freedom is also evident in other liberal democracies such as Australia, Canada, Germany, France, Italy and Britain. While attacks on higher education in these countries may not be as explicit as it is in the United States, all governments have imposed austerity measures on higher education. This means that universities – both public and private – are faced with actual or threatened withdrawal of federal support that creates a climate of insecurity. In Australia, for instance, defunding universities justified the former far-right Morrison government to charge higher tuition for students pursuing degrees in the humanities. This policy effectively undermined research and teaching in departments such as history, anthropology, sociology and English, and gave grounds for not hiring or letting go of faculty trained in specific disciplines. Furthering many university’s vulnerabilities is the global geopolitical landscape of rising antidemocracy, harsh anti-immigration policies, economic protectionism and a focus on national security that directly impacts international student mobility. In the UK, US, Canada and Australia, caps on student visas and a decline in Chinese students attending their universities in recent years have severely impacted budget models for sustainable higher education sectors.

With economic and political insecurities profoundly destabilizing higher education institutions around the world, efforts to resist encroachments on academic freedom have been marginalized and often silenced. Contributing to the lack of engagement around academic freedom is that there is confusion over what it means and why it matters both on and off campus (Scott 2019). Overall, there is a failure to link external political interference in the classroom to the overreach of antidemocratic politicians seeking to censor critical thinking that challenges their authority to govern. However, as mentioned above, these two phenomena go ‘hand in hand’. Rising antidemocracy and declining academic freedom are interconnected global trends that are dramatically erupting in local campuses across the United States and emerging in various ways in other democratic countries such as Britain, Germany, Spain, Portugal and France.

**Academic freedom vs free speech**

Academic freedom suffers from widespread confusion over what it actually means in practice. When trying to define academic freedom, some people reference the UNESCO document titled ‘Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel’ (1997). This document acknowledges different understandings of academic freedom in various countries but nonetheless sets out universal standards regarding what is understood to be its general practices. According to UNESCO:

Higher-education teaching personnel are entitled to the maintaining of academic freedom, that is to say, the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies. All higher-education teaching personnel should have the right to fulfil their functions without discrimination of any kind and without fear of repression by the state or any other source. (Article 27)
While the UNESCO statement is relatively clear, the problem is that some international treaties explain academic freedom in slightly different terms or fail to define it at all. This ambiguity makes the concept challenging to discuss and defend.

However, despite definitional difficulties, among scholars there is widespread consensus that academic freedom is not equivalent to free speech. Academic freedom involves a lot more than speaking such as the freedom to conduct research, access and disseminate information, design curriculum and teaching, collaborate with scholars in other universities, and participate in university self-governance. As argued in a ‘Submission to the Special Rapporteur on the right to education’ (2024) by Scholars at Risk and the Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas:

it is crucial to distinguish academic freedom from freedom of expression. While the two are interrelated and overlap (for example, an on-campus lecture within a professor’s area of expertise is a simultaneous expression of both rights), they are neither identical nor fully coextensive. Much conduct protected by free expression has no connection to processes of research, formal education, or educational expertise, and as such is outside academic freedom. Moreover, although free expression generally protects the right to speak and publish with few limitations, it lacks any obligation of quality, expertise, sourcing, or professional standards. Academic freedom, in contrast, includes expression that is broadly related to research or educational training or expertise, and requires adherence to ethical and professional standards, as determined by other academics of similar training and expertise.

The distinction between academic freedom and free speech is fundamental. If universities are to push back against ideological or religious interference, it is essential to guard against reducing academic freedom (that pertains to professionally trained and credentialed scholars in a collective institutional setting) to free speech (that pertains to any individual). As noted further in the ‘Submission to the Special Rapporteur’:

Where courts, states, institutions, and the public blur these distinctions, and define academic freedom as synonymous with freedom of expression, the exercise of academic freedom can be mistaken (or intentionally misrepresented) as mere expression or partisan opinion. This opens the door to politicizing the classroom, deters scholars and educators from informing public discourse for fear of retaliation, and may subject scholars and educational institutions to outside pressures and attacks. Today, deliberately conflating academic freedom with free speech is a common strategy among far-right leaders around the world. It has enabled, for instance, neo-fascist activists to demand a right to come on campus to speak to students in the United States. Evoking their constitutional free speech rights, extremists have forced some university administrators to acquiesce, particularly in Republican-led states such as Florida and Texas. In Britain, reducing academic freedom to free speech also appears in the UK Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 which was aggressively pushed by the conservative party. The Act established a ‘free speech tsar’ – academic Arif Ahmed – to adjudicate cases where speakers on campus are canceled or met by student protests. The legislation presents the need for governmental oversight over adjudicating whose opinion matters more: scholars and students engaging in fact-based discussion (even if the issue is controversial and interpreted in various ways) or a lay person pushing their personal opinion and fabricated entitlement to a submissive student audience. In the disingenuous call for tolerance of diverse perspectives, the Act expressly undermines the notion of academic freedom being a professional right of scholars pursuing fact-based research and teaching protected by self-governing autonomous universities.

Reframing and grounding academic freedom in social responsibility

I argue that overcoming apathy about attacks on academic freedom requires reframing it in a way that is comprehensible to diverse communities inside and outside the academy. This is essential for marshaling public attention about far-right attacks on intellectual freedom, and communicating why it matters even among those who for various reasons can’t afford or don’t want to pursue higher education. I argue, as have others, that thinking of academic freedom as social responsibility to wider societies is a potentially effective mechanism to make the concept legible and meaningful.
Historically, talking about academic freedom as social responsibility and social engagement has been more common in countries of the global south in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia (Brandenburg et al. 2019; Choudry and Vally 2020; Hall and Tandon. 2021). The words of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, particularly his writings in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968) (published while he was in exile from right-wing militants) are emblematic of the long-standing connection in the public imaginary of education’s social responsibility in furthering political consciousness and liberation in many countries grappling with colonial pasts. Freire inspired university protests across Latin America and Africa and was particularly inspirational in the Soweto student uprisings against the racist apartheid regime in South Africa in 1976 (Aitchison and McKay 2021; Sefatsa 2020).

While social responsibility may mean different things to different communities, it is possible to develop a generalizable concept applicable to higher education. A notable example is provided by Scholars at Risk (SAR), which helps scholars fleeing political persecution around the world and supports an extraordinarily diverse global academic community. SAR argues that one of the core values of higher education is social responsibility, defining this as a duty ‘to seek and impart truth, according to ethical and professional standards, and to respond to contemporary problems and needs of all members of society’ (SAR 2020).

This definition of social responsibility and its being a core value in higher education is echoed in various academic organizations and networks. For instance, the report State of play of academic freedom in the EU Member States, issued by the European Parliament in March 2023 links academic freedom with academic responsibilities. According to the report, academia’s responsibilities include ‘the handling of societal challenges and crises, such as climate change, growing inequality, or global pandemics’ (Maassen et al. 2023, 9). The report goes on, ‘Overall, academia has the responsibility to use its higher education and research capacities to contribute, for example, to the adequate handling of challenges and crises, and in that way to the maintenance and enhancement of the democratic principles and institutions that form the political order of our societies’ (Maassen et al. 2023, 9). The importance of academic responsibilities to wider societies, and how to define and comparatively align and monitor them, has been the subject of debate across the 49 countries that today make up the European Higher Education Area (Marquand 2018).

Echoing EU efforts to connect academia with wider societal concerns is the Talloires Network, an international group of universities from all over the world. Established in 2011, this network is a ‘growing global coalition of 431 university presidents, vice-chancellors and rectors in 86 countries who have publicly committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of their institutions. It is the largest international network focused particularly on university civic engagement’. The Talloires Network partners with national and regional networks across Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe in ‘building a global movement of civically engaged universities’. Developing academic coalitions that transcend national borders is also endorsed in the Inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy (2021) that sets out guidelines for defending scholars across the Americas including Canada and the United States. This innovative document also calls for rethinking knowledge production as ‘borderless’ (Darian-Smith 2023). Together SAR, the European Parliament, the Talloires Network and the Inter-American Principles illustrate a range of efforts that promote the relationship between higher education and social responsibility that advances all members of society regardless of educational status or national identity.

Scholars would agree with these efforts to support higher education’s social responsibility to foster inclusive democratic societies. For instance, Emiliano Bosio and Gustavo Gregorutti in their edited volume The Emergence of the Ethically-Engaged University (Bosio and Gregorutti 2023) explore how universities around the world can be involved in reconnecting learning to issues of politics and morality. They seek to move beyond market-driven priorities within higher education and foster a philosophy centered on ethics and ‘informed by principles of mutuality, reciprocity and social responsibility’ (Bosio and Gregorutti 2023, 2). Importantly, they argue, this requires embracing nonwestern perspectives, theories and worldviews and engaging with nonwestern ethics such as the concept of ubuntu in African universities (Waghid 2023; Waghid et al. 2023). This pluralist...
engagement is essential for reimagining the university as an institution in pursuit of global peace that includes ensuring a sustainable planet in which all can live (Bosio and Gregorutti 2023, 238). While the volume does not explicitly engage with authoritarian attacks on universities, Hans de Wit notes in the foreword that diminishing academic freedom undermines the needs of global society. He goes on, ‘moving away from a more competitive and exclusive higher education’ system which is what drives elite universities in the global north and global south, and moving ‘toward a more socially responsible and inclusive one is more important than ever’ given global challenges such as the climate crisis, pandemics, massive inequality and so on (Bosio and Gregorutti 2023, ix).

Henry Giroux’s work on critical pedagogy goes one step further. Building upon the insights of Paolo Freire, he points to the emancipatory potential of knowledge sharing and argues that intellectuals have a special responsibility to examine how power operates ‘through institutions, individuals, social formations, and every life so as to enable or close down democratic values, identities, and relations’ (Giroux 2010, 2020; Giroux and Bosio 2021, 9). This requires, Giroux goes on, that scholars appreciate ‘why the tools we used in the past feel awkward in the present, often failing to respond to problems now facing the United States and other parts of the world’ (Giroux and Bosio 2021, 10). Moreover, he adds, this necessitates that scholars find a ‘new vocabulary for connecting not only how we read critically but also how we engage in movements for social change’ (Giroux and Bosio 2021, 10). I think this is a very important point – not only does the Euro-American academy need to think with a different set of ethical and social priorities, but it also needs to find a better way to communicate to people on and off campuses why they should care about political attacks on universities and colleges.

Common to these civil society networks and scholarly interventions is a realization that a university’s social responsibility is to local, national and global communities. This is particularly relevant given rising antidemocracy and declining academic freedom are interconnected global phenomena, and that many societal problems (i.e. immigration, climate emergency) have local, national, regional and transnational impacts. Appreciating the global dimensions of local attacks on students and faculty opens up much-needed conversations about what the internationalization of higher education should look like in the future and what its aspirational goals should be (de Wit and Jones 2022; Marginson 2024).

Mobilizing a new political consciousness – environment, labor, gender, education

Higher education is under siege around the world, although this is not widely recognized in the United States. Even within US national borders, attacks on academic freedom are not given the attention they deserve and apathy continues to dominate the academy and wider public. Even the student protests that have erupted on some university campuses around the Israel-Gaza war have been politically framed as being primarily about antisemitism and not academic freedom. Given these realities, there is an urgent need to link the defense of academic freedom with the defense of just and democratic societies, and to find, as Giroux urges us to do, a ‘new vocabulary’ for engaging in ‘movements for social change’ (Giroux and Bosio 2021, 10).

Widespread social movements and labor strikes that have erupted over recent years in the United States offer an opportunity and possible way forward. These mass demonstrations reflect public concerns over a range of issues that include working conditions, racial discrimination, police violence, gun control, trans-gender and LGBTQ+ rights, abortion rights, and protecting the environment. In addition, they reflect a renewed political consciousness around building more inclusive societies and sustainable futures in light of the failures of the former Trump administration and its aggressive anti-climate, racist and misogynist agenda.

For instance, regarding climate activism, throughout 2019, the United States, as did many other countries, witnessed massive protests around the climate emergency, loss of biodiversity and Big Oil’s extensive environmental degradation. The year before Greta Thunberg had spear-headed the
School Strike for Climate social movement, which joined up with the Global Climate Strike and together fostered massive demonstrations for a week in September 2019, coinciding with the United Nations Climate Action Summit. The September protests saw over 4,500 mass mobilizations in 150 countries with an estimated participation of over six million people. Not since the first Earth Day in 1970, which brought 20 million people to the streets in the United States, have so many people publicly demonstrated in support of saving the planet and demanded that political leaders take action.

In 2020, the #BlackLivesMatter (M4BL) and #MeToo movements exploded across the United States and quickly turned into global social movements that brought worldwide attention to enduring systems of racism and gender discrimination (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2022). These mass mobilizations have more recently been joined by a wave of labor strikes (and attempted labor strikes) among Toyota and Tesla autoworkers, Hollywood writers and actors, Amazon and Starbucks employees and various health, transportation and hospitality sectors that rapidly expanded throughout 2022-3. These more conventional union activities have been complemented by a rise of alternative labor organizing channeled through local communities (Galvin 2024). This more diverse labor mobilization around workers’ rights is striking given the dramatic decline in organized labor movements from the 1970s on, and the dismantling of union activity across the United States for decades (Nolan 2024; Schiavone 2007; Zieger et al. 2014).

Notably, President Biden – in explicit contrast to former president Trump – has stood strongly with unions and supported workers organizing and exercising their right to collective bargaining, calling such action ‘democracy in action’. Biden is the first sitting president to join a picket line, and in September 2023 stood with members of the United Auto Workers striking for better pay and conditions outside the GM Willow Run Distribution Center in Michigan. In January 2024, the United Auto Workers endorsed Biden’s run for a second term as president. Earlier in 2023, the National Education Association (NEA), the largest union in the United States with over 3 million members, endorsed Biden for re-election. According to Becky Pringle, president of the NEA:

> No matter what we look like, where we come from or where we live, we believe every student deserves safe, just, and high-quality public schools, colleges, and universities that help them pursue their dreams and fulfill their true potential. President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris are tireless advocates for public education, proving time and time again that this is the most pro-public education and pro-union administration in modern history.

Alongside public protests and labor mobilizations there have been numerous student demonstrations and union activity on university and college campuses (Figure 3). Students have demanded higher-paid tutoring positions, better health access and lower tuition rates, and in a few cases less political interference by far-right Republican governors over college curriculum and course offerings. According to a report by The Chronicle of Higher Education, graduate-student unions have increased more than four-fold since 2019 and union membership has ‘skyrocketed’. As noted by Michael Sainato, labor reporter for The Guardian, the surge in strikes in 2023:

> are a continuation of [a] wave of industrial action in higher education in the US last year. In late 2022, 48,000 graduate workers and post-doctoral researchers went on strike throughout the University of California system, the largest strike in US higher education history. There were 15 academic strikes in the US in 2022, the highest number of strikes in academia in at least 20 years.

Grassroots mobilization around the environment, the M4BL and MeToo social movements, along with union activity across several sectors including student-led strikes suggest a new political consciousness emerging within US society. Extreme political division positing the majority of the population against Trump’s core minority supporters is building consensus that the far right does not work on behalf of all members of society. Many people – particularly younger people – are angry about the Republican’s deregulating environmental protections, dismantling women’s reproductive rights, targeting LGBTQ+ and trans communities, and limiting people’s basic civil and political rights around voting, housing, health care and labor conditions.
What these various mass mobilizations underscore is a broader conversation around the idea of social responsibility for building more equitable and inclusive societies. This is a message of solidarity that clearly resonates across large swaths of the population, suggesting a way to make the concept of academic freedom more accessible to people inside and outside the academy (Shefner et al. 2014). I argue that this moment of heightened political consciousness and collective action presents an opportunity to recast academic freedom as embodying social responsibility for building a better world for all members of society regardless of class, gender, race, religious or educational differences. This will require that higher education and labor sectors start appreciating that they are working for the same goals. And it will require that others concerned with specific issues such as climate, police violence, gun control, abortion and voting rights learn to see universities and colleges as allies in their fight against antidemocracy.

**Conclusion**

My argument is that by making the connection between academic freedom and social responsibility explicit there is a better chance to translate to both academic communities and wider societies what is at stake in escalating attacks on higher education. Reframing academic freedom as social responsibility helps overcome the idea that the freedom to think only matters to individual researchers inside the ivory tower. Reframing academic freedom also speaks to those from marginalized
positions and lower socioeconomic statuses who have been historically denied access to higher educational opportunities. It is important to remember that many of the loudest supporters of the #M4BL come from a section of the population that is often racialized and disenfranchised.

Ultimately, linking academic freedom to social responsibility could foster – I suggest – networks of solidarity across education and labor sectors, and across cultural, social, racial and religious divides (Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor 2024). One can see echoes of today’s labor demonstrations in the later decades of the nineteenth century when many millions of working-class people protested against laissez-faire capitalism and called for higher wages and the eight-hour workday. These labor demands were met with violent police suppression, dramatically illustrated in the Haymarket riot in Chicago in 1886 which left eleven dead and many injured (Darian-Smith 2010). As noted by Todd Vachon, scholar of labor relations, ‘There’s a lot of historical rhyming between the period of the origins of Labor Day and today. Then, they had the Carnegies and the Rockefellers. Today, we have the Musks and the Bezoses … It’s a similar period of transition and change and also of resistance – of working people wanting to have some dignity’ (cited in Grantham-Philips 2023).

Today’s social movements and revitalized labor consciousness also echoes the mass demonstrations of 1968 that were often led by student groups and erupted across the United States, Europe, Africa, Middle East and Latin America. These protests focused on a range of issues such as the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, anti-nuclearization, women’s liberation, apartheid, labor conditions, the Cold War and the Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia. It is important to remember that these mass demonstrations were met by widespread police crackdowns and violence across many US cities as well as suppression in places such as London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Mexico City, Brasilia, Amsterdam, Helsinki and Sydney (Kurlansky 2005).

Today we are in another historical moment of multiple crises that are destabilizing the hegemonic global power of the United States, marked by escalating regional conflicts with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war. These crises are linked to largely unregulated extractive capitalism that has accelerated the looming climate emergency. They are also linked to the collusion of powerful energy, finance, technology and defense corporations with far-right think tanks, lobbyists, conservative foundations and rising numbers of antidemocratic politicians across the global south and global north (Darian-Smith 2022). As people take to the streets to demonstrate against inequality, poverty and genocide, antidemocratic regimes around the world are implementing various forms of anti-protest laws that include limiting public demonstrations, restricting free speech, criminalizing protestors and attacking independent journalists and mainstream news media.

Scholars and students are being caught up in widespread societal conflicts and subjected to increasing policing and political surveillance over what can be researched and taught. Once again universities have become targets of censorship and oppression, but unlike episodes in the past these attacks are now occurring concurrently on a global scale. However, universities are also potential sites in which to articulate new political imaginaries and alternative futures that push back against rising authoritarianism and the massive injustices facing human and nonhuman worlds. On an optimistic note, scholars Aziz Choudry and Salim Vally, in their edited volume The University and Social Justice: Struggles Across the Globe, remind us that:

Perhaps at its most potent, campus activism has gone hand in hand with organizing with communities and movements both inside and outside of universities to bring social change. As with other movements, it is sometimes from the margins, tensions and contradictions of such struggles that powerful challenges to power and the status quo emerge (Choudry and Vally 2020, 17).

Building a collective political framework is the imperative facing everyone working both inside and outside the academy who wishes to live in equitable and inclusive societies. Global crises around immigration, pandemics, climate and racial discrimination require all scholars to think about what social responsibility means and for who, and ask how can higher education be a meaningful driver of social change? Optimistically, ensuring academic freedom will foster creative political
theories and new imaginaries of transnational and translocal political practice and solidarity. These theories will involve – hopefully – thinking about all members of any society as subjects with common rights that include the freedom to think.

Notes

7. https://talloiresnetwork.tufts.edu/who-we-are/.
9. According to labor journalist Hamilton Nolan, in the US in the 1950s one in three people was a member of a union, but this has been reduced to approximately one in ten people today (Nolan 2024).

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