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OMMENTS

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Toward the Academy of the 21st Century. Deinstitutionalization, Useless Knowledge, and the Possibility of Critique

The “Hage controversy,” which is the focal point of the text by Senka Božić-Vrbančić and Tomislav Oroz, serves as a starting point for the authors to re-examine not only academic freedoms but also the role of the university, knowledge, and critique in the contemporary world. To understand the university today, its problems but also its potential, the authors adopt various temporal perspectives, ranging from the *longue durée*, which focuses on the role of the Enlightenment and the potential of Humboldt’s university, to the recent neoliberal reconstruction (which not only results in the precarization of academic work and questions the profitability of entire disciplines but also, on a discursive level, equates academic freedom with freedom of speech). In addition to this problematization, we will also mention the issue of post-war Germany and post-liberalism. This will allow us to raise questions about how institutions can speak of freedom, as well as the problem of the “distribution” of freedom within the discourse on academic freedoms itself and the marginal positions that can disrupt the attempt to limit academic freedoms.

In our view, the problematization of the specific case of academic freedoms needs to be situated in the specific context of Germany, whose institutions and practices of freedom of speech developed through the processes that the authors mention but whose formation was also influenced by the post-war debt to the state of Israel.

This context is defined by what Karl Jaspers, at the end of World War II, called “German guilt” (*Kollektivschuld*), a “structure of feeling” that was, at that moment in history, more of a project than a reality. Responsibility for the Holocaust in German politics gradually transformed into a form of debt. As the first German State official to give a speech in the Knesset, Angela Merkel stated in 2008 that “every German

Government and every German Chancellor before me has shouldered Germany's special historical responsibility for Israel's security. This historical responsibility is part of my country's *raison d'être*.¹ However, until now, the defense of Israel was synonymous with the defense of liberal values; it meant defending the only liberal democracy in the Middle East. The war crimes committed by the Israeli army in Gaza, the fanatical support from a large part of the public, and public statements by various politicians and state officials calling for ethnic cleansing have made the contradiction between commitment to rights and freedoms and the defense of the state of Israel impossible to overlook. The manifestation of this contradiction has not yet led to the withholding of support for Israel for the time being; however, abandoning the defense of Israel as a supposed bastion of human rights, freedom, and democracy is a sign of a deeper shift in the political climate – and not only in Germany.

When the Academy Speaks

On February 7, 2024, the Max Planck Society published a statement on its website announcing the termination of Ghassan Hage's contract as a visiting researcher at the Society's Institute for Social Anthropology. Suspiciously categorized under the section "research policy," the statement consists of only five sentences:

The freedoms enshrined in the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany for 75 years are invaluable to the Max Planck Society. However, these freedoms come with great responsibility. Researchers abuse their civil liberties when they undermine the credibility of science with publicly disseminated statements, thereby damaging the reputation and trust in the institutions that uphold it. The fundamental right to freedom of opinion is constrained by the mutual duties of consideration and loyalty in the employment relationship. Racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination, hatred, and agitation have no place in the Max Planck Society.²

Underneath "civil freedom of speech," we find an obligation that is neither unambiguous nor clearly defined (the discourse of obligation appears later in the text, this time not so much towards abstract and universal ideals but towards a concrete institution). The core issue for the Max Planck Society is the contamination of the academic space. Hage's offense, therefore, is not telling falsehoods (the content of his statements is not disputed as factually incorrect) but rather about violating the *cordon sanitaire* established around the academic world – politicizing what is deemed apolitical or created by the evacuation of politics. Hage's comments on social platforms thus call into question the "credibility of science." Of course, this declaration could also be viewed as a cynical attempt to mask the fact that the Society, like most German institutions, is loyal to the state of Israel; the institution openly declared its support for Israel

1 Merkel, Angela. 2008. "Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel to the Knesset in Jerusalem." <https://m.knesset.gov.il/EN/activity/Documents/SpeechPdf/merkel.pdf> (accessed 7 August 2024).

2 Available at: <https://www.mpg.de/21510445/statement-ghassan-hage> (accessed 7 August 2024).

immediately after October 7.³ However, should we stop at this claim, we would miss the dimension of discourse, whose effects, and the new meanings it continuously generates under entirely different circumstances, are impossible to control. Once formulated, statements, logic, and arguments take on a life beyond their original intentions.

In its statement, the Society does not present itself as a collection of diverse organizational units, nor as a national or federal institution, but rather as the *subject of the enunciation*. Speaking from a specific institutional position with a complex structure that demands “loyalty” and “consideration” beyond mere contractual obligations, the Society’s proclamation assumes the duty of defending universal values. Armed with such a mandate, the subject of the enunciation is *doubled*, becoming something more. It no longer stands in a position of dialogue, where the statement would mark the beginning of something that is still undefined; on the contrary, this is an autoreferential structure of speech, in which the subject’s discourse turns towards itself, “ejecting” the Other as the enemy of the universal on whose behalf it speaks.⁴ Thus, the proclamation, in the first place, answers the question “Who is speaking?”. In this context, any response, even one from different institutions or academics, falls flat because the Society is not addressing them. Rather, it is *self-constituting* through its discourse. If there is a clear historical distinction, the function of the academy was once to provide an institutional framework for a space in which discourse unfolded, but now it has become the subject of speech. This shift radically changes the likelihood that one of the effects of discourse will be the formation of new subjects.

Freedom, Law, and Post-Liberalism

We return to the initial issue raised by Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz in their text, namely the relationship between academic freedoms and the institutional frameworks and laws that limit them, by first examining the role of law and prohibition. While law and freedom are not necessarily in opposition, we believe that the question of freedom is inherently tied to how it is defined. In a psychoanalytic sense, law is what enables and animates speech, simultaneously allowing for its own transgression. Freedom cannot function solely for itself, and here we diverge somewhat from the value-oriented definition of academic freedom as discussed by Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz, in that freedom – academic or otherwise – can only be articulated in relation to specific prohibitions and the points from which discourse on freedom emerges.⁵

3 Employees have sent several open letters requesting a statement from the Society regarding its support for Israel and the Hage case. “The Max Planck Society must end its unconditional support for Israel.” *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/24/the-max-planck-society-must-end-its-unconditional-support-for-israel> (accessed 7 August 2024).

4 For the dynamics between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the statement in Jacques Lacan’s work see: “Subject of the Enunciation/Subject of the Statement.” *Concept and Form: The Cahiers pour l’Analyse and Contemporary French Thought*. <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/concepts/subject-of-the-statement-enunciation.html> (accessed 7 August 2024).

5 Here, we want to avoid Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave and the problem of consciousness. Instead, we wish to open the question of a situation in which the master tells the slave that they are free: while these words are liberating, they do so in a way that ties the former slave’s freedom to its source in the master’s speech.

Judith Butler's notion of "rogue viewpoint" (Butler 2009), which the authors examine, is not formulated in a vacuum of law or within a domain of absolute freedom. Rather, it is fundamentally rogue *from*, and it symbolically and optically refers to, the institution, i.e., the Law. In other words, the "rogue viewpoint" is *thought "from the outside"* precisely because it is constitutive of the *possibility of knowledge "from the inside,"* as it defines the boundaries of the permissible and the possible.⁶ However, this does not resolve the key problem posed by the authors: "How can we think differently?"

Let us take a step back: What is the relationship between law and freedom in a neoliberal context? We approach the issue of freedom in a slightly different register from the authors; freedom is not an object of theoretical reflection nor a space of absolute autonomy for the subject, but rather a political-ethical practice situated within specific historical, political, and economic contexts that regulate individual behavior. Foucault held that liberalism redefines the problem of governance in such a way that it wants to rationally organize governance so that (the state) governs "minimally," leaving the possibility of organizing social life to the market and other actors (Foucault 2001). Individual freedoms, which are not seen as a limitation of governance but an integral part of governing rationality, are a key element of this. We believe that a range of contemporary phenomena points to a mutation of the Foucauldian problematic of governance, as well as the general relationship between it and the state, once again raising the question, "How does one govern freedom?" In the case of Hage, we see that freedom itself was not in question but rather the way it was "used." This is something beyond mere cynicism of power. Insofar as freedom of the individual and the self-regulation of their own behavior played a key role in the rise of liberal political rationality, their redefinition potentially marks a shift in the very principle of governance toward something we might provisionally call *post-liberalism* – more as a set of questions and problems of contemporary politics than as a defined form of political rationality. Limiting individual freedoms or rights is not foreign to liberal governance; on the contrary, as Barry Hindess notes, it has been a constitutive element since its inception (Hindess 2005). What is new, and what may constitute a defining element of a rationality of governance that is yet to emerge, is not merely the increasingly intense regulation of freedoms but the *political logic* behind that demand. One figure who has managed to explicitly capture this tendency as "illiberal democracy," at least in European Union politics – and who is simultaneously its "symptom" – is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.⁷ In a

⁶ While our relationship towards the law is more psychoanalytical, Butler uses a Foucauldian vocabulary to reflect on what it means to be critical towards the existing principle of rationality and what it means to be "outside" in this case: "To be critical of an authority that poses as absolute is not just to take a point of view but to elaborate a position for oneself outside the ontological jurisdiction of that authority and so to elaborate a certain possibility of the subject. And if that domain establishes some version of political rationality, then one becomes [...] a rogue subject as it were, unintelligible within those political terms and yet with a critical relation to existing modes of intelligibility" (Butler 2009: 791).

⁷ Orbán, Viktor. 2014. "Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp." <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp> (accessed 7 August 2024).

speech in which he introduced the concept of “illiberal democracy,” Orban, in several instances, problematized freedom while also accepting it; although such a policy does not challenge the formal assumptions of democracy, its task is to formulate different strategies aimed at the “regulation” of freedoms. What is new in “illiberal democracy” is that this regulation is no longer carried out in the name of protecting freedom. Illiberalism organizes the question of freedom around “national interest,” “self-sufficiency,” “community,” and territory – a phantasm of sovereign power.

Toward a Conclusion: The Potential of “Useless Knowledge”

We believe that the current problem facing academia, which is simultaneously historical and theoretical but also political, must be situated across different temporalities, registers, and genealogies. The reexamination of the university and the academic production of knowledge should not take place *solely* as a response to the challenge of neoliberal restructuring. Only multiple temporalities give us the opportunity to grasp the conflicts, aporias, structures of domination, and processes of exclusion that have underpinned the production of academic knowledge – factors that are not necessarily a consequence of the neoliberalization of academia.

While we agree with Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz’s thesis regarding the promise of cultural anthropology, we argue that its potential lies not primarily as an epistemological framework but as a set of questions – that is, as a constant reexamination of every form of thought about freedom. Only then can we truly be free. In addition to the obvious need to reaffirm and defend academic freedom, we believe it is necessary to simultaneously concentrate on the critique of the ideas that define or organize freedom. In the context of the “Hage controversy,” this, of course, means a concrete defense and the legal proceedings Hage himself initiated against the institution. However, more importantly, it means posing the question: Who has the right to speak in the name of freedom? We must question the legitimacy of the institution that can speak and define, not only to challenge its legitimacy but also to address the para-legal effects it produces; *the desire to codify the coordinates of freedom*. We believe it is necessary to pursue policies and strategies that challenge any form of defining the limits of freedom. The battle is lost from the outset if we accept models of action that are visible from the consequences of a conflict with the institution. As an institution, the Society has positioned itself as the exclusive source from which the discourse of the universal emanates, the entity that defines the space for dialogue (through interactions with the press, lawyers, various offices, etc., but not directly with Hage himself). Hage’s intervention is thus unacceptable to the Society not only because it introduces political values antithetical to the academic vocation; it is unacceptable because it calls into question the power relations that regulate what can and cannot be said. Following Foucault, we must cease thinking of ideal spaces of freedom and refuse those that are offered to us in order to open up spaces for the (yet) unsayable.

But how to achieve this? What does it mean to open a space for the unsayable (Butler)? Outlining the contours of a world that is still in formation and, therefore,

necessarily presents itself as ambivalent and contradictory, Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz can only close their text by *opening* it. By connecting the “anthropological tradition of critical thought” with the promise of academic production of knowledge, the authors glimpse horizons of possible thinking that do not stop at contemplating the problem of academic freedom or even the future of the humanities but return to anthropology’s potential to open a space for “radical otherness” for the university of the 21st century.

Is it not precisely within the anthropological tradition of critical thought that the expansion of the realm of what is possible is inherent? Or, to conclude with a quote from Ghassan Hage, “It is precisely the anthropological tradition of critical thought that allows us to be radically other than what we are,” which is essential for new imaginaries and “alter” politics of the 21st century. [...] Can we, through rogue viewpoints, move beyond the sphere of regulation and open ourselves up to the radical otherness that Hage speaks of when we think about alternative possibilities for the idea of the 21st-century university?

What does this openness represent, and how is it achieved? What is this process of becoming open that would open up new forms of politics and imaginaries? How can this opening be turned into communal practice or, perhaps even more difficult, into academic, disciplinary practice, which by definition tends toward regulation and is of a closed nature? What kind of (academic) discipline would be one of continuous openness? What would it mean to abandon the sphere of regulation and establish a “line of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 2013) from the academic sphere in a way that resembles what Franco Berardi Bifo calls “desertion” (Baldachinno 2024) while still retaining the *possibility of transforming the collective practice of knowledge production*? Does radically different knowledge imply a radically different process of production, different places and subjects of that production, and finally, a different form of knowledge?

We do not want to claim that academic freedom is not an (ideal) value, but we do not necessarily see it as an expression of the institutional framework in which it is currently articulated. Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz thoroughly critique the position of workers at modern universities and the pressure exerted on them by neoliberal mechanisms of competition and precarity. However, we are not so convinced that looking back (toward the ideals of humanistic education and the Humboldtian university) is the path to opening space for critical thought in the 21st century. Is the defense of the institution of academic freedom the path to forming new forms of knowledge and incorporating external positions, or is it necessary to build external positions that will offer space for criticism that constantly shifts, escapes, and evades institutional control, including that of the university itself? Perhaps therein lies the promise of what Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz call “useless knowledge” – a kind of leftover knowledge, or even entire disciplines, that “fail” to adapt to the imperatives of commercialization of academia. This is knowledge that is deemed useless, for which no apparent purpose has been found, and therefore cannot be codified or is not worth codifying academically. Free from the weight of utility and application, it can offer itself as a foundation for the possibility of thinking about the world in the making.

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Academic Freedom Otherwise. From Liberal Elitism to
 Emancipatory Praxis?⁸

Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose. (Kris Kristofferson)⁹

Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free. (Fannie Lou Hamer)¹⁰

Standing with the Palestinian People

If this important and perceptive essay had not started with the case of Ghassan Hage then I surely would have. Hage's dismissal represents, without doubt, one of the most recent, and blatant, instances of academic administrators and politicians choosing to ignore, if not ride roughshod over, the ideal of "academic freedom," thus demonstrating the fragility of the concept itself. The fact that such an attack occurred within the German academic and political space, and with regard to comments critical of the actions of the Israeli government and the genocide of the Palestinian people, is far from coincidental, but nor is it exceptional.

In June 2024, I attended the joint International Studies Association – Central and Eastern European International Studies Association (CEEISA-ISA) conference in Rijeka, Croatia. Ahead of the conference, I was forwarded a post from The Yugoslawomen+ Collective and friends headed "No conferencing as usual during genocides!"¹¹ Without invoking the concept of academic freedom, but rather focusing on "the urgency to uphold the commitment to academic engagement in freedom struggles and to speaking truth to power," the collective called for a series of protest actions during the conference and demanded "institutional action and response from the CEEISA leadership." The Collective drew attention to the "scholasticide and educide" of colleagues in Gaza and sought to stand in solidarity with "students and educators in Gaza, the West Bank and occupied territories."

There was much to learn from the response of the CEEISA leadership, of some conference attendees, including keynote speakers, and of the University of Rijeka, which, indeed, became the subject of rather heated discussion on social media.¹² Here, I confine myself to some impressions from the first spontaneous discussion

⁸ With thanks to Emina Buzinkić, John Clarke, Karin Doolan, Mariya Ivancheva, Sladjana Lazić, Pavao Parunov, Elena Stavrovska, and Mislav Žitko for extremely useful comments on an earlier draft of this text.

⁹ Lyric from the song "Me and Bobby McGee" (1971).

¹⁰ Speech Delivered at the Founding of the National Women's Political Caucus, Washington, D.C., 10 July 1971.

¹¹ https://yugoslawomenplus.net/2024/06/17/no-conferencing-as-usual-during-genocides/?fbclid=IwZXh0bGhZWCMTAAAR24WHZUOLTJztjLElIXjxR5YKCPnrmKq7VZLCL7KEXWix1Ji4HHZtJuUh0_aem_QY-zOhg--CxOUB0jmmwyjVg (accessed 1 October 2024).

¹² My initial reflections can be found online at: <https://x.com/Paulstubbbs/status/1803800598573146125> (accessed 1 October 2024).

organised by the collective in the lobby of the Civil Engineering Faculty building, one of the conference venues, on 19 June 2024. On arriving with two members of the collective, I was shocked to find four people employed by a private security company in the lobby. When one of the collective members displayed a small Palestinian flag, they were told that this was not allowed and, if they did not remove it, the police would be called. As more people joined, including figures from the university leadership, the threat to our actions was downplayed and replaced by a more liberal form of “repressive tolerance,” basically respecting our right to demonstrate but also the need of the university to “keep the peace.” During the discussion, the Dean of the Civil Engineering Faculty informed us that, under Croatian law, universities were autonomous spaces that the police could not enter unless explicitly asked to do so by the University administration.

Reflecting on this in the context of reading the essay by Senka Božić-Vrbančić and Tomislav Oroz, I share, and in some ways, want to amplify, the authors’ deep ambivalence regarding the meanings and lived realities of academic freedom today, not least in terms of what it enables and what it rules out and, above all, how contingent and contextually specific it is. The contrast between our ability to protest, underpinned no doubt in some way by a legacy of academic freedom, even dependent as it was upon the university administration not calling the police, and the fate of fellow students and professors in Gaza and beyond was striking. In addition, the same invocation of “academic freedom” actually led to a sense that the theme was not so important, not least as “it was a long way from our region” and that CEEISA did not issue statements “even for conflicts much closer to us” as a leading CEEISA academic stated.

An illustration of the double standards was provided by a colleague from Estonia who informed us that, when she had led protests over the Russian invasion of Ukraine, she received explicit and tangible support from her university. In contrast, while organising events in solidarity with the Palestinian people, she was told, in no uncertain terms, to do that in a personal capacity and not to implicate the university in any way, shape, or form. In an interesting turn, two days later, the protest explicitly connected the University of Rijeka with the Lürssen Foundation, founded by the German-registered Lürssen group whose shipbuilding business builds warships for the Israeli state. The Lürssen Foundation, with the Rector as President of its Managing Board, is a key strategic partner for the University of Rijeka, a creative neoliberal institution meant to be free of the cronyism of other universities in Croatia, whose Rector prides herself on her liberal tolerance.¹³

Contextualising “Academic Freedom”

It is one of the strengths of the essay above that it outlines the fate of “academic freedom” in the context of the neoliberalisation of higher education and the by now all too familiar precariatization of employment, promotion on the basis of pseudo-scientific metrics, the prioritisation of so-called STEM subjects over humanities and social

13 See <https://www.portalnovosti.com/kud-plovi-rijecki-brod> (accessed 2 October 2024).

sciences, the obsession with the skills supposedly needed on the labour market over the capacity for critical thinking, and the ever tighter policing of the statements and actions of academics, whether expressed publicly or privately, in terms of institutional perceptions of reputational damage.¹⁴ It is, perhaps, inevitable that the forensic attention to neoliberalisation in the text leaves much less space for a deeper historical understanding of the contradictions of “academic freedom,” although there are traces that can be found. At times, the authors are in danger of suggesting that what preceded the neoliberal conjuncture was, somehow, in a strictly normative sense, better.

Without delving too much into the historical origins and shifting spatio-temporal meanings of “academic freedom,” I want to follow the authors’ explicit invitation to search for “alternative imaginaries for the future of universities” or what I prefer to call “academic freedom otherwise,” a prefigurative sense of “the worlds we seek to build,” a kind of “gesture of desire” (Olufemi 2021) that seeks to “disarm and dislocate the naturalized hegemony” (Gibson-Graham 2006: 60) through a “gaze at systems not from the centre, from the privileged, but rather from the periphery” (Lendvai-Bainton and Stubbs 2023: 436).

I do this in two stages. The first goes beyond the idea, expressed in the essay, that “universities have never been ideal places” to suggest that, prompted by a footnote in the essay, it was not just during the Enlightenment that “academic institutions were enclaves for the privileged” nor was it merely “for a long time” and hence, by implication no more, that “access to these institutions was not granted to those who were marked as unsuitable with regard to race, gender or ethnicity,” not to mention social class. We need to explore universities and the concept of academic freedom itself as a product of complex power relations out of which claims to professional privilege and autonomy emerged that explicitly excluded, and continue to exclude, subaltern subjects and subjectivities even as there has been a gradual process of extending higher education to “the masses.” Following Henry Giroux, we need to see neoliberal marketisation as merely the latest in a long history of “regimes of educational degradation” (2011: 38), each with its own specificities and contradictions.

The second seeks, precisely in the terms of the *YugoslaWomen+ Collective*, to shift the focus from “academic freedom” as a component of the bourgeois public sphere to a more radical emancipatory, collective, and decolonial commitment to “academic engagement in freedom struggles.” I undertake this double movement inspired by Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz’s text, albeit through a lens distrusting of the liberal and Eurocentric frames that are frequently invoked in defence of “academic freedom” by progressives in the Global North and, all too often, beyond. “Academic freedom” is, hence, always a product of contestation, being both a reflection of power relations and a rhetorical device with material effects that can be used to intervene in and transform such power relations. Hence, rather than a static defence of, or attack on, “academic freedom” as if it were a free-floating concept, it is important to ask where? when? by whom? and for what purpose? it gets mobilised.

¹⁴ On the impacts of neoliberalism in Croatian universities see Doolan (2009) and *Akademaska Solidarnost* (2012).

A Sphere of Privilege? The Historical Social Relations of Academic Freedom

The legacies of the establishment of universities and, alongside them, ideals of “academic freedom” dating back to the Enlightenment, at least in Europe, as a space of relative autonomy from both church and state are, of course, still felt today. Crucially, it is important to remember that “modern universities, from their very beginnings were complicit in and benefited from colonization and racialization,” with many “founded and funded through wealth accumulated through slavery and colonialism” (Stein and Andreotti 2016: 2). In any case, as Altbach reminds us, even for the privileged professor in his – and it was an exclusively all-male preserve, of course – cloistered ivory tower, “academic freedom was never absolute” even if “greater freedom of expression existed in universities than elsewhere in society” (2001: 206).

Subsequently, the German model with its origins in 19th century Kantian-Humboldtian philosophy held sway, combining “freedom to teach” with “freedom to learn” and, later, “freedom to research.” It is worth remembering, in the current context of the crackdown on any expression of solidarity for the Palestinian people, that this model “did not necessarily extend to protection of expression on broader political or social issues” (*ibid.*). Even today, the reproduction of a peculiarly skewed privilege, through the system of *habilitation*, a second doctorate later in one’s career that provides an exclusive license for independent research and teaching, serves to ensure that the position of full professor is largely reserved for German-born white men, explicitly creating a two-tier academic career track or, in many cases for non-tenured faculty, a dead end. It is worth noting that, albeit in hybrid forms, versions of the German model continue to be institutionalised in many parts of Central and Eastern Europe, including Croatia, where I have worked for the last thirty years.

Without getting into debates about the continuities or discontinuities with the German model, the rise of what might be termed a New World model across the Americas, often systematically mislabeled as a specifically United States model, did transform the idea of “academic freedom” at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Crucially, here, the concept of the “autonomous” university, a product of the 1918 reform movement in Latin America, expanded the idea of academic freedom beyond the university itself, creating a professoriate enjoying, again within limits, freedom of expression on topics of public importance, beyond narrow fields of scholarly expertise (*ibid.*: 207). Within the United States, the misnamed American Association of University Professors adopted, in 1915, a Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure, which sought to enshrine a particular set of rights and privileges to, at the time, a rather small number of academic faculty, essentially a self-regulating “community of the competent” enjoying a degree of “autonomy from managerial interventions” (Calhoun 2009: 571).

As Calhoun and others rightly suggest, even in the changed conditions of the present, any ideal of academic freedom must include “the responsibility of academics to engage the broader public” (*ibid.*: 564), both outside the university and, of

course, inside it in terms of students, non-academic staff, adjunct faculty, and so on. What if, in much of the world, even with increased access to higher education for groups previously excluded, universities continue to reproduce class-based, gendered, and racialised privilege? What if, even when higher education is available to those outside the traditional elite, at best, it affords entrance to that elite for a select few or, more usually, redefines hierarchies through a clear divide between “the best” universities and students and “the rest,” based, in Bourdieu’s terms (1986), on possession of social and cultural capital alongside economic and symbolic capital.

In short, even if those with less social capital manage to get into universities, they remain, on the whole, outsiders, excluded from the dominant habitus. Logically, then, even demands to make access to higher education free risk being regressive insofar as dominated groups pay taxes to ensure the continued higher status, and earnings, of the dominant groups. “Academic freedom” here can easily become just another symbolic arbiter strengthening the borders of a bourgeois civic sphere in which those deemed to be lacking “civility” can never truly belong. As Steven Salaita, fired from a tenured position at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in August 2014 for tweets deemed “uncivil” during a previous Israel military assault on Gaza, reminds us: “[...] it is not merely that the accusation of uncivil behavior is more likely to be thrown at bodies of color, of immigrants, of queers [...] these bodies are *always already* suspect” (Le Espiritu and Puar 2015: 64).

Transnational Solidarities, Revolting Students and Utopian Experiments

A more truly global perspective would explore the changing meanings of “academic freedom” in the context of national liberation struggles and sovereignty in newly decolonial states, as well as the relationship between such national struggles and more transnational forms of solidarity. In terms of the latter, revisiting programmes of student and intellectual exchange between Yugoslavia and the Global South within the Non-Aligned Movement (cf. Dugonjic-Rodwin and Mladenović 2023) is incredibly important, not least as they appear to have been explicitly forgotten in the post-Yugoslav space in favour of an exclusive, and highly parochial, focus on Europe.

In terms of the former, Mariya Ivancheva has recently addressed both the centrality of the concept of academic freedom to struggles for national liberation and against authoritarian dictatorships whilst noting how individualistic, as opposed to more collective, ideas of academic freedom, linked to ideals of “free speech,” can buttress conservative forces “as they defend the right of misogynist, racist, and other controversial opinions to be platformed at university campuses” (2023: 52). In her case study of Venezuela, when the Chávez government sought to use universities to promote wider social justice, she shows how “academic autonomy was weaponized by the opponents to prevent a deep structural reform that would allow universities to serve the public” (ibid.: 53).

Finally, if it is the case, as Božić Vrbanić and Oroz suggest, that “academic freedom has always pertained to collective rights granted to academics,” then a more transformative stance would extend these rights to students and, indeed, beyond. How student revolts and protests have deepened the meaning of “academic freedom,” especially when going beyond demands for greater student participation in university governance to broader questions of social justice and the social role of universities, is an important theme that merits much greater discussion.

In many ways, the positive legacy of *blokada* which, beginning in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb in Croatia in 2009,¹⁵ quickly spread across the region, can be found in social movements and political platforms committed to direct democracy, and in the growth and strengthening of critical study programmes *outside* the formal university (women’s studies, workers’ studies, peace studies, queer studies, programmes in political ecology and the like). I am less convinced that there has been a significant change in an institution marked by cronyism and a strange competition-collaboration dynamic between neoliberals and neoconservatives in which Marxist, feminist, queer, and decolonial scholars are fearful for their positions or, in some cases, reproduce the worst kinds of elitism within their own spheres of influence, including in relations with their students.

In seeking different ways of enacting the university (Wright et al. 2019), we need to revisit ideas of “the pluriversity” (Boidin, Cohen and Grosfoguel 2012), of “critical pedagogy” (Freire 1970), and of already existing alternatives such as the university that exists within the Mondragon collective experiment in Spain. This would give us the opportunity to pose, in new ways, “questions about participation, forms of power, relationships and belonging” (Clarke et al. 2015: 212) that go far beyond liberal claims to “academic freedom.”

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The Antinomy of Academic Autonomy

Introduction

In this contribution to the discussion on academic freedoms,¹⁶ I will briefly outline how, in a post-revolutionary democratic political society,¹⁷ the autonomy of academia

¹⁵ http://factum.com.hr/hr/filmovi_i_autori/svi_filmovi/blokada (accessed 4 October 2024).

¹⁶ The article is conceived as a commentary on the initial text discussing academic freedoms by Senka Božić-Vrbanić and Tomislav Oroz. Therefore, the paper critically examines certain themes and authors presented by Božić-Vrbanić and Oroz in the initial text.

¹⁷ Here, modern democracy refers to the type of *political society* that emerged at the end of the 18th century with the revolutions in America and France. It is important to note that the term political society entails the general way of life of a community, not merely a type of political system. In other words, the term political society refers to the totality of relationships people establish with one another and with the environment understood in the broadest sense – nature, the world (Lefort 2000: 148).

could not be defined solely as autonomy but rather as a paradox or antinomy of academic autonomy. By antinomy of academic freedom, I refer to the situation in which the heteronomous relationship of academic communities to political society is a positive condition for the development of their freedom or autonomy. The positive influence of heteronomy on the development of autonomy exists because the source of freedom in a democratic society cannot simply be found in a principle that is independent of society. Rather, it must be immanent to political society, i.e., it must act and exist within the social fabric. Modern democracy is an order based on a political division that is immanent to society, not on a neutral principle or concept of the common good that could be an object of knowledge (Lefort 2001: 254). It is an order in which, because it is based on a “groundless” political division, there is no active, direct connection between power, law, and knowledge. Therefore, the foundation of the democratic order cannot be found in an unconditional, outer-worldly, “external” foundation – the transcendent Other – nor in an “internal” knowledge of society’s essence or substance – the One – but rather in an active political division and the political (Lefort 2001: 258). In the modern democratic order, politics is, therefore, the autonomous and dominant dimension of collective life. In such a political society, because the political is the dominant dimension of social life, the source of academic freedoms and the autonomy of universities could not be found in some non-social and non-political principle – reason, knowledge,¹⁸ law, God, the Idea – nor could it, as in the liberal tradition of thought, be unilaterally defined as freedom from, as freedom from social conditions and political demands. Additionally, because this is a society without an ultimate foundation, the source of academic freedom could not be found in the concept of the common good as an object of knowledge.¹⁹ Instead, the source of academic autonomy had to be anchored in democratic political division and in the various political-ideological demands and conditions that society, directly and indirectly, placed on academic communities. This assertion contrasts with the view often found in literature dealing with academic autonomy, where it is claimed that the survival of the democratic order directly or indirectly depends on academic freedoms.²⁰ In contrast to such a view, I will argue that academic freedom depends on the active life of democratic political society.

I will also show how the antinomic structure of academic autonomy has enabled the creation of an interval between knowledge and power, distancing the pursuit of knowledge from the sphere of domination, and how it has created the conditions for academic freedom beyond the nihilism and logic of supremacy inherent in normative practices and theories of autonomy.

18 Among other things, this also implies academic and disciplinary competencies that can be sources of authority.

19 For example, Scott argues that the fight for academic freedoms cannot be conducted based solely on the idea of freedom but must also be grounded in the concept of the common good (Scott 2019: 15). Also see: Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz. 2024. Contrary to such a view, I argue that the source of academic freedoms lies in the absence of a fundamental concept of the common good.

20 The idea that the democratic order depends on academic freedoms can be found, for instance, in Scott (Scott 2019: 15). Also see Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz 2024.

Academic freedom, therefore, should be understood as the paradox of the autonomy of academic institutions and universities, a paradox that Humboldt already encountered in the theoretical explication and practical implementation of his educational reforms.²¹ Throughout modern history, this paradox has most often been visible in cases where academic freedom has been threatened and when those defending autonomy have sought valid philosophical and ideological arguments for its continued existence. This most often appears in the form of negation, when freedom is absent, and accordingly, not as the current state of affairs but as a normative ideal to be pursued (Scott 2019: 5; Božić-Vrbančić and Oroz 2024: 4).

In contrast to such an approach, which begins with autonomy and emphasizes its endangerment, this contribution starts from the premise that when discussing academic freedom, one must speak of a dual entity, a paradox, in which academic freedom depends on its limitation imposed “externally,” by the broader political society.²² More precisely, in this contribution, I argue that the emergence and persistence of academic freedom can only be understood by grasping the totality of the paradox – the antinomy of academic autonomy – because it is a fruitful antinomy in which academic freedom depends, so to speak, on unfreedom, on the conditions and demands imposed by society.

The paradox can be concisely stated as follows: a democratic political society indirectly requires academic institutions and associations to serve it in various ways, but in such a manner that they remain independent and free from that society itself, free from the external pressures and purposes imposed by society. In other words, the academic world must be subjected to the demands of political society by fulfilling its social mission while simultaneously maintaining its own autonomy and freedom in thought and action. To be free from society while indirectly contributing to its development and well-being was the winning formula for modern academic institutions, ensuring both autonomy and social progress. Thus, although it may seem at first glance that submitting to societal demands must eliminate autonomy because it points to the academy’s actual dependence on external pressures and influences, i.e., its heteronomy, I argue that only through the fruitful interweaving of heteronomy and autonomy can the freedom of the academic world be secured.²³ As long as this paradox remains active and alive, and as long as there is an active identity of antinomic determinations, the academic sphere can enjoy its full freedom.²⁴

21 The central philosophical problem for Humboldt was how to find a philosophical solution to the paradox in which the education (*Bildung*) of a free individual requires a community that is not under the control of an authoritarian, administrative state. He calls this free community the nation (Sorkin 2003).

22 It is important to note that the term political society does not refer to the state and government, but to the democratic society which, due to its revolutionary roots, should be autonomous and superior to the state.

23 The combination of autonomy and heteronomy, the active and passive modes of existence, is a fundamental characteristic of democratic political society, which is simultaneously both – subject and object, the seer and the visible, the sentient and the sensible. It is crucial to note that it is simultaneously both, but without merging the two poles into a unified identity. Such a society, therefore, can never be fully transparent to itself. It remains an enigma to itself. The philosophical expression for this mode of social existence was provided by Merleau-Ponty, who referred to it as “flesh” (2012).

24 If we express this paradox through spatial metaphors, we could say that academic institutions must exist both “inside” and “outside” of society. For example, in modern university practice, this paradox manifests concretely in

The claim that academic autonomy can be maintained if it is combined with heteronomy – specifically, a heteronomous relationship with society – may seem quite unusual at first glance. However, upon closer examination, a different picture emerges. Philosophically, political and moral autonomy implies that an individual or collective subject has the ability to make an unconditional decision and act as the sole initiator of an action that cannot be fully explained by any prior conditions. In this sense, the subject performs a free, ethical, and political act. At the same time, in order to avoid complete arbitrariness and lawlessness, this action must also be explainable by general rules. Thus, a free act must be both explicable and inexplicable – initiated by something that the subject can and cannot fully clarify for itself using objective reasons and rules. This further implies that in its action, the subject can and cannot be guided solely by itself – by its own consciousness, which grasps objects and relations, and by its own autonomy, defined in such a way that it maintains an instrumental relationship toward these objects.²⁵ Therefore, in addition to being guided by rules it can explain to itself, the subject must also be influenced by something inexplicable and, therefore, indirect,²⁶ which cannot be explained by objective reasons, causal relationships, or some kind of knowledge. If the subject cannot be guided solely by objective rules, it must be influenced by other subjects, i.e., it must be under the indirect influence of another subject. Thus, when we speak of the autonomy of academic and scientific communities, for them to be autonomous, in addition to self-regulation governed by their own disciplinary and group rules,²⁷ they must also be guided by the indirect influence of another subject. In the modern post-revolutionary context, this other subject is no longer a religious community or a politico-theological order but rather modern political society – the enigmatic democratic subject without a defined substance.²⁸

the fact that universities gain social legitimacy and financial resources from external actors – government administrations, political entities, and economic organizations – so that, in the end, they may remain free from them in order to critically evaluate these actors from the “outside.”

25 The source of all objectivity, including academic objectivity, paradoxically lies in what the knowing subject cannot explain to itself through a causal relationship – in what cannot be defined by the relationship between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge.

26 Indirect influence cannot be directly turned into a moral imperative, nor can it be directly recognized or understood; it must be experienced on a phenomenological level. Therefore, “within” society, this influence can be continually re-experienced and sensed. Due to the decisive importance of aesthetic experience for the functioning of a democratic political order, Martin Plot called the modern democratic order an “aesthetico-political regime” (2013).

27 Academic communities that are guided solely by their own disciplinary rules possess the authority of knowledge and discipline in relation to other social actors.

28 The dependence of universities on societal demands – their society-induced heteronomy – paradoxically contributes to their autonomy. To further clarify this paradoxical relationship, consider a scenario where the university, as a knowledge-producing community, becomes entirely autonomous in its function and the goals it sets for itself. Such a community would rely solely on knowledge in determining the objectives of its pursuit of knowledge. This autopoietic relationship, where knowledge produces knowledge, would quickly turn into a predominantly instrumental relationship with itself and its environment. The pursuit of knowledge would lose the ability to pose new questions and instead become a quest for instrumental solutions to pre-existing problems, turning into contemporary solutionism (Morozov 2013). In this way, the search for knowledge would lose its critical and skeptical dimension.

The Influence of the Antinomy of Autonomy on the Knowledge-Power Relationship

The previous analysis has demonstrated that as long as modern political society effectively operates as a democratic subject devoid of substance, the autonomy of universities does not need to derive its legitimacy from any principle, disciplinary authority, or substantial idea of the common good that is above the social reality. Instead, it can be sourced from the antinomy of autonomy, where the academic community is perpetually split by ambiguous, enigmatic social demands.

This described split in the academic community brought on by enigmatic social demands is crucial for forming and maintaining a distinction, i.e., non-identity, between academic knowledge and power, understood as power over someone or something. The enigmatic nature of social demands opens the possibility of “problematizing” any scheme of objective reality, raising theoretical and practical questions and not just seeking solutions. In an academic community with an active capacity for problematization, rather than solely seeking solutions to pre-defined social problems, the potential exists for separating knowledge from power, defined as power over someone or something. The ability to create problem areas holds the potential to erode established epistemic domains where subjects have already exerted control over specific objects through knowledge. Thus, the possibility of problematization undermines the authority of knowing subjects and any potential instrumentalization of knowledge based on that authority.²⁹ Since the heart of a democratic society is an active Difference that conditions the ambiguity and enigmatic character of social demands, these demands potentially subvert any instrumentalization and subjugation of knowledge to someone’s authority, including the authority of the academic community itself. Extinguishing the active division at the heart of a democratic society paves the way for the instrumentalization of knowledge for various purposes, reducing academic pursuits to an activity that primarily seeks solutions to already established problems.

In addition to all that has been mentioned, another important consequence of the division of the academic community by enigmatic social demands follows from the above. The division of the academic community is a positive condition for its democratization and the opening of space for its autonomy, as well as for resisting unequivocal ideologization and direct subordination to economic and political objectives. Therefore, as long as academic communities are splitted by social demands, the knowledge produced in those communities does not necessarily have a direct relationship with social power and, consequently, with social opinions and various conceptions of the common good. In other words, the described heteronomy of universities concerning social demands ensures an interval, a difference between knowledge and power, while also ensuring the autonomy of the academic community.

²⁹ It is also important to highlight that the opening of problem areas allows for an analytical approach to the structural level of reality.

It is also important to note that although the enigmatic demands coming from society undermine the identity of academic communities “from within,” they are perceived as something coming to the academic community, conditionally speaking, from the outside and as something that can ultimately be questioned in the spirit of objective academic research. Therefore, as long as social demands imperatively imposed on university and academic communities are seen as coming “from the outside,” – the knowledge produced in this manner retains an indirect relationship with the common good and power.

The social implementation of knowledge produced in this manner will depend on contingent power relations – i.e., on politics. In this regard, the ever-present political competition conditions the application of knowledge, and the university and academic community are not entirely responsible for how the knowledge they generate will ultimately be applied. This exemption from ultimate political decision-making and accountability allows academic communities to produce unorthodox, “scandalous,” transgressive, non-common-sensical knowledge that can undermine public taste and prevailing morality.³⁰ For instance, the attempt to directly apply academic knowledge in the spirit of social reform condemns politics to technocracy. It identifies knowledge with current power relations, stripping it of its critical function to interrogate social common sense.

Furthermore, the transgressive potential of academic knowledge leads to the heart of the antinomy of autonomy, as it shows that academic knowledge parasitizes social opinions. Without opinions, there can be no knowledge, and without their mutual conflict and interdependence, there can be neither critique nor transgression of established views.

The mentioned conflict between systematic and critically oriented knowledge and societal opinions leads to a critical question at the heart of the paradox. The unrestrained pursuit of ideas entails the possibility of radical critique and skepticism toward established academic and social beliefs and opinions, as well as the articulation of new ideas that may conflict with prevailing social conventions, opinions, and beliefs. Critique and skepticism, therefore, imply a negation of current opinions and the generation of ideas that threaten the general taste of the public. Hypothetically, then, nothing prevents the sting of skepticism from turning against the public belief in the social mission of academic institutions and destroying the social agreement upon which autonomy rests.

³⁰ Exemption from political and moral responsibility is analogous to the political exemption that occurs in a state of exception, when the legal order is temporarily suspended. Therefore, the potential subordination of politics to knowledge, and the idea that politics can be directly shaped through the academic apparatus, open up the space for the normalization and permanent presence of a political state of exception. The normalization of the state of exception is a fundamental characteristic of totalitarian political regimes. Thus, all demands that academics must directly create and implement specific policies using academic insights should be approached with caution. It is important to note that the direct rule of academics and experts is not in the spirit of a democratic political order, which is based on the idea that all individuals are equally capable of governance. The direct rule of experts is, in fact, a form of guardianship (Dahl 1999).

Nihilism: Autonomy as a Regulative Ideal

During the modern development of academic institutions, the deadly sting of skepticism could, seemingly, be “tamed” by an ideal measure and one of the categories of time – the future. Knowledge production can be conceived as a process directed towards a future, during which present opinions and knowledge should be overcome. In this case, the potentially destructive negation of current opinions during the production of knowledge can be bypassed by a regulative ideal and public faith in the future, undefined, but greater good – and in both social and human progress, which would be an indirect consequence of the pursuit of truth. Therefore, the pursuit of knowledge and good can move into the realm of something to be strived for, something yet to be achieved – a realm of regulative ideals and what ought to be rather than what is. From this perspective, academic autonomy can be understood as a form of ethical practice (Scott 2019) in which the university’s social mission, the pursuit of knowledge that might contribute to a future good, is inseparable from the ideal of autonomy.³¹ In this case, the regulative ideal ensures the necessary interval, distance from current social opinions and power relations, thereby guaranteeing the autonomy of knowledge and providing shelter from destructive nihilism. Invoking the regulative ideal also ensures universality and distance from any current historical or social configuration. Although it is articulated as a historical category, it still possesses a transhistorical dimension that is continually rearticulated in a specific historical context (Scott 2019: 17). In this way, the ideal is defined as an unconditional, constitutive principle that stands “outside” social relations and historical context, providing a basis for the critique of social power.

It is important to note that the aforementioned normative theory of university autonomy, in its characteristics, belongs to the ideology of liberalism³² and, as such, is subject to criticism from both left-wing political positions, which emphasize the influence of material social conditions on the production of knowledge, and from right-wing positions, which highlight the insufficient valuation of specific cultural values and traditions. Setting aside ideologically motivated critiques of liberal theoretical normativism, one could pose a philosophically oriented question: Is the pursuit of knowledge regulated by ideals free from power, and does it offer a refuge from nihilism? A response motivated by Nietzsche’s insights (2004) would briefly conclude: no.

Modern morality, structured by regulative, Kantian Ideas, is based on what ought to be, a future state of affairs, rather than what was and what is. In this form, morality

31 One way to theoretically explicate the paradox of university autonomy is by defining the paradox as an irresolvable conflict between the proclaimed “ideals” of university autonomy and actual practice. That is, between the regulative ideal of a self-governing and self-regulating university community, which is in constant tension with the administrative and institutional reality that is directly dependent on social conditions and the historical context – social opinions, interests, and various forms of social and political power (Scott 2019).

32 Insights into the permeation of all forms of action and existence with ethics as a fundamental feature of liberalism were systematically provided 100 years ago by Karl Mannheim (1978).

becomes a way of mastering the state of affairs and things, generating activity and the potential to direct events.³³

Academic freedom, exclusively defined as an ethical practice governed by ideals, is, in fact, a form of power over people and things – an expression of the nihilistic will to power. Freedom defined in this manner affirms the active dimension of action while neglecting the passive, heteronomous component inherent to ethical and political action in a democratic society. Thus, it is potentially antidemocratic and represents the political dominance of certain social groups. For these reasons, it is more appropriate to understand academic autonomy as a coexistence of heteronomy and autonomy, i.e., as an antinomy, rather than merely as an ethical practice regulated by ideals.

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From “Uhljeb” to “Intruder”

An “uhljeb” is a person who receives a salary from the state budget for work that does not result in the creation of added value in terms of producing goods or providing services that improve the quality of life for the users of those goods or services.

(Dictionary of Neologisms, Institute of Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb)

First of all, I applaud the effort of the editorial board of *Etnološka tribina* to bring the complex issue of the purpose and social position of the academic system, which has already been partially analyzed within our academic community, into focus by taking into account even more complex and increasingly uncomfortable questions that have been imposed by the post-pandemic and multi-war state of the world.

It is of great importance that the debate is framed with such suggestive guidelines from the introductory text, which draws us into the structural reasons for the disruption of academic autonomy that we are currently witnessing. Although the text explicitly calls for dialogue, asking “What are we to do?” at its very end, realistically, nothing could be added to this energetically rounded study on the level of argumentative ingenuity, theoretical coverage, and bibliographical thoroughness except simply co-sign it. If there is any room left here for *rogue viewpoints*, upon whose emancipatory potential the text itself also relies, it lies precisely in the strong cognitive and emotional self-recognition it offers in a series of its observations, thus opening up to individual experiences and possible constructive interventions to its content. My contribution should be understood as an attempt to enrich the presented theses with a kind of stronger domestication, *grounding* them into the specificities of the local context.

33 People have neither power nor control over that which simply exists and that which has already occurred.

This is entirely in line with the decision of the driving narrative to reach for a broader and seemingly mismatched defining register of determinations than the immediate cause of its commentary might demand: a politically symptomatic case of blatant censorship and severe sanctioning of academic freedom of speech. These and similar excesses, in fact, merely expose the final illusion of the neoliberal academic system that, by guaranteeing “constant growth of academic output,” it can forever ensure the stability and independence of its social position. For the system is now itself handing over its earned autonomy to various restrictions, including the advocacy for fundamental humanistic values on which it rests, when such advocacy is deemed “controversial,” prompted by suggestions from politics that paradoxically instrumentalizes its own historical indebtedness.

As members of the academic community that largely prefers to accept accusations of conformist motivations for its social passivity rather than risk potentially transgressive acts, we should first address the normalized strategies that systematically discourage and preemptively “intercept” exercising the right to freedom of speech. These can be recognized in the regime of increasingly stringent and difficult-to-meet criteria for evaluation, which the academic system imposes as a condition for the reproduction of its subjects, exposing them to vulnerability and gradually “depriving them of a life worth living” as one of many descriptions of precarity.

In our case, as is well known, the introduction of such a model has proceeded gradually and in parallel with the maintenance of the academic system within the state-funded *public sector*. The shift to *competitive business models and human resource management*, to use the appropriate terminology, was largely exhausted in the realm of bureaucracy, with the multiplication of regulations and the constant updating of various documentation, particularly the ongoing reformulation of its content within a “given discourse.” The now-necessary categories, such as *strategy*, *mission*, and *vision*, whose distinction and standardization were based almost exclusively on the adoption of specific linguistic competencies, were mostly borrowed from the advanced skills of the then-successful non-governmental sector. Translated into the documents of publicly funded institutions, these concepts underwent numerous superficial but *effective* interventions to prove their sustainability and alignment with the priority of *strategic national interests*. Meanwhile, the project system, introduced as a parallel and, to an extent, a control mechanism for transforming the existing organization of activities, is also largely sustained by the same principle of “imitative magic”: the appearance of competitiveness based on the allocation of state funds to bodies of independent agencies, foundations, and centers of excellence. All in all, with such hybrid models and hesitant signals of readiness for market-oriented operations, the academic system fails to shed its public-sector perception of being an area full of “uhljebs.” As an already epic motif that permanently disrupts the Croatian transitional narrative, this space, ready for political favors and concessions, and in the backdrop of feigned work and fabricated results, parasitizes a budget filled with entrepreneurial initiatives from the *real sector*.

The closest approximation to this characterization can be found in the activities within the field of the humanities, where shifts in the understanding of the *usefulness of knowledge* have been least favorable. Pursuant to alignments of strategic interests, their missions – originally adapted for visions of national and cultural identity – have ultimately succumbed to favored directives for *collaboration with the state economy*, leaving them perpetually disadvantaged due to poor demonstrability, questionable applicability, and a certain redundancy, if not outright “superfluity” of their results.

On the other hand, and to be fair, job security with a retirement perspective, combined with the fulfillment of currently achievable advancement criteria, still constitutes a working and existential environment far removed from the grim prospects of the global precariat. Regarding freedom of speech, protected by the highest authorities of the Croatian Constitution and the Higher Education Act, one might speak of certain tendencies towards its legal “framing,” especially in the articles of newly established *disciplinary regulations*, though the boundaries are (for now) drawn by the problematically provable act of “damaging the institution’s reputation.”

If there are latent causes behind the reluctance to exercise this right, they may lie precisely in the conditions of such “mixed” values. These generously offer themselves to those forms of participation that – before our very eyes – erode the reputation of our academic institutions, including the most *prestigious* one, through political maneuvers, nepotism, plagiarism, academic dishonesty, the misappropriation of public funds, and even illegal construction of vacation homes. This is the local and domestic version of “precarity,” as a space for the triage of good conscience and corrupt capacities of individuals, leaving most of us silently facing choices that are preemptively tainted and hindered by the lack of *freedom of expression*, torn between responsibility to *those near* and those far, with the additional burden of allegedly undeserved privilege, strategically emphasized by the social environment.

But these circumstances also give rise to new, secondarily conditioned forms of “metasolidarity,” which include the obligation to understand and be considerate when judging others’ choices, even when they derive their *right to silence* from a position of coercion. Instead of drawing us into moralizing, condemnation, and mutual distrust, the system’s deviations become a common battleground for the freedom of speech we strive for – a place that appears as its epiphenomenon and an excess that can be removed, masking its structural social character. Because if there is any “good news” in all of this, it is the horizon of a freedom that emerges precisely from letting go of lamentations over the loss of gained academic rights in the importance of their philosophical principles, institutional guarantees, or forsaken exemplars. In fact, without excessive irony, we might conclude that their disintegration goes in favor of reviving the humanistic values in which they were once embedded, bringing the construct of the *academic citizen* into a world where rights for the majority are anyway realized outside of given conditions, always anew, and often in circumstances of their denial or loss.

As ethnologists, we are closest to this level, especially those of us situated on the edges of *empires of democracy* where the effects of their directives have been cush-

ioned, even if ending up in the hybrid chaos of local political folklore. Nowadays, this field of experience, with its freedom, represents an inversion of the role models of not so long ago: the price of speaking out against the war in Gaza, after all, was first placed at the doors of prestigious European institutions.

At the same time, in our academic circles, a petition for “epistemic justice for the Palestinian people” has been published and signed by more than three hundred individuals, many of them from our fields of ethnology, folkloristics, and anthropology. The experiences of the periphery have taught us, among other things, the economy of the struggle for professional responsibility, adhering to the engaged modernist legacy of our local discipline, with numerous epistemological traces left there by the reception, and at times confusingly relativistic effects, of anthropological theory. Meanwhile, from those same academic institutions that now expel their employees for political transgressions, we received lessons about the bias that threatens our insights from the *place of a culture* marked by the atavistic impulses of ethnic divisions. One of the lasting consequences of this discomfort and burden of *a priori* bias is the insistence on “epistemic propriety” in social critique, which limits itself to simply *cleaning its own doorstep*. While relatively functional in regional contexts, this could also have produced paralyzing effects when addressing issues beyond this domestic scope.

Since then, however, numerous efforts have been made in our local epistemology (particularly by our “useless” and marginal fields) to write analytically about the deviations, injustices, and losers of the domestic restoration of capitalism, about refugees, gender and class inequality, and even the politicization and clericalization of academic institutions. Though long-lasting and disheartening, the latter was still a reaction to the historic student blockade at local universities.

The unique and global experience of the pandemic and the rise of populist narratives it triggered perhaps shook the foundations of our subject and its social role the most. Nevertheless, while high academic bodies provided guidelines for the proper naming of the state caused by the *grand plague of the crowned virus*, part of our commitment to understanding cultural subjects from *their point of view* transformed into a decisive alignment with the Enlightenment legacy of our profession. From this position, we now defend the introduction of gender studies into the university curriculum against the regressive and repressive tendencies of our current political context. And tomorrow, something else will need defending.

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AMBIENT TIMES, Academic Freedom, Neoliberal Universities,
 and Genocide. A View from Below (Australia)

Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. (Kris Kristoffersen)

Can we grieve not for a person but for an institution? (Raewyn Connell)

All of which raises questions of whether the university-as-such is beyond reform; if it should be abolished or perhaps more mercifully "hospiced" toward a timely and apposite death. (Sandy Grande 2018: 49)

In response to the important provocations raised by Senka Božić-Vrbančić and Tomislav Oroz, I survey here three critical aspects of academic freedom. First, the evolution of academic freedom over time. Second, the state of academic freedom in the neoliberal university, particularly in Australia, which has arguably embraced neoliberalism more deeply and swiftly than other countries. Australia's experience may foreshadow what lies ahead for other regions that have not yet marketised their universities. Third, the uses and abuses of academic freedom in this time of genocide. How have academic freedom and neoliberalism facilitated the normalisation and defence of genocide?

The social atmosphere of uncertainty and the structure of feeling Senka Božić-Vrbančić and Tomislav Oroz describe is shared, felt, and difficult to name – much like the times in which we find ourselves. What times are we in? A time of genocide, neoliberal time, crisis, polycrisis, catastrophe? A time of madness? Are we on a precipice, in a graveyard, or a hospice? We exist in ambient times – uncertain, yes, but also cruel and violent. Hands grasp for twigs in the savage sea of this present. Academic freedom, democracy, international law, the public good, the good university – they drift aimlessly, bobbing uselessly, inadequate and unable to save us.

The politics of silencing that has descended on universities – and beyond – requires no ruler. The posture of the rogue is self-policed out of existence, even beyond our imagining. To be recognised unremarkably is the desire. Respectability is the goal. Silencing regimes discipline powerfully, though sometimes nonchalantly, sometimes vengefully. The invisible hand of the market performance manages, and the violent hand of surveillance censures, in the name of academic freedom, those who speak out of tune.

What is speakable? What is permissible? Academic freedom once inferred that curiosity could occur without obstruction. Today, academics are free to be competi-

tive, commercial, and marketable. Or silenced for speaking, teaching, researching, and opposing genocide. As Judith Butler (2006) asks, is the pursuit of academic freedom a distraction from other freedoms, a displacement of political analysis of the ruin of universities and the heightened intrusion of state and non-state actors? Does the world burn while we discuss academic freedom?

The contemporary social atmosphere reshaping universities and the ideal of academic freedom remains influenced by the kind of Butlerian “rogue viewpoints” that Senka Božić-Vrbančić and Tomislav Oroz asked for. These viewpoints continue challenging the boundaries of what can be questioned and discussed, even as they are increasingly muffled, ignored, and refuted, with retribution being meted out. Efforts have intensified to silence Palestinian academic advocacy by framing these viewpoints as a threat to the safety of Jewish academics and students, yet these “rogue viewpoints” meet this intensity as Australian universities attempt to dismantle academic freedom through and in defense of Zionism (see Noam Peleg 2024). Advocates continue their impermissible speech, naming Palestine as a racist apartheid state and identifying Australian marketised and neoliberal universities as accomplices in its carnage.

In what follows, it becomes clear that academic freedom was conceived in and for another time. In Australia, in the time of now, those who invoke it most frequently – managers and Zionist lobbyists – generally deem it unfit for the time while nevertheless using it most effectively and powerfully as a mechanism for silencing. When universities were regarded, at least rhetorically, as institutions of public value producing knowledge as a public good, the pursuit of knowledge was deemed valuable and worthy of protection from managers and outside obstructors. However, in the time of academic capitalism and ambient genocide, the *use*, rather than the principle of academic freedom, is having the greatest effect.

Academic Freedom over Time

How is it that academic freedom, a set of principles that were to ensure intellectual contribution to the “advancement of society through critical inquiry and scholarship” (Russell 2002), has been most effectively wielded to stifle or intrude on that freedom? What happens when academic freedom is seized by the right wing? Academic freedom was meant to offer freedom not only from state or government interference but also from non-state actors, including right-wing advocates, media organisations, corporations, and academic institutions themselves (see Russell 2002; Tatour 2024).

Many still presume that the freedom to pursue scholarly research, engage in academic discussion, and teach and speak without retribution or administrative constraints is a fundamental characteristic of the university. This freedom, however, is linked to questions about the university’s purpose. What is a university for, especially in the time/s we are in?

The history of universities in Australia and elsewhere varies by storyteller, but there is consensus that there has never been a golden age of universities or academic

freedom. Tension between the powers of the university and the freedom of individual scholars has always existed. That is, the university is both an enabling condition for freedom of research and discussion and an institutional restraint on that freedom (Fitzgerald 2017: 10). It is within this tension that the value of academic freedom resides.

There are other dualities and contradictions associated with academic freedom. Butler (2017) points out that academic freedom is both a right and an obligation. A right to pursue lines of research without interference from authorities and an obligation to participate in governance to ensure that universities preserve this right to critical thought, even or especially when it is not in line with the official views of the state or other external institutions. This rests on the meaning of universities not only being a public good but one for an informed public and with the capacity to call into question that which surrounds us, including government policies.

Joan Scott (2019, 2024) points to a set of problematic dualities associated with academic freedom and the common good. The notion that universities and academics contribute to the common good implies that we know what this common good is. But there cannot be only one common good when multiple publics cohabit. Moreover, the tension between what she calls *politics* (i.e., contests about the meaning of power in which outcomes are not determined) and *partisanship* by those who politicise to achieve predetermined outcomes is a feature of the neoliberal university. The partisans know in advance the enemies they want to defeat (Scott 2024: 150).

In *Dirty Knowledge* (2022), Julia Schleck links academic freedom with the labour conditions essential for universities to fulfil their public responsibilities. Tenure for academics was granted as assurance that they could pursue research and teaching without fear of retribution. Academic freedom as an employment relation has been transformed over time, with increasing labour precarity and casualisation. Academic freedom and the university, therefore, need to be rethought. The university, once linked to the common good and academic self-governance, has ceased to exist. Speaking from the United States, she argues that neoliberal values have insinuated themselves so deeply into every area of academic life that universities for “the” common or public good are now obsolete.

Sandy Grande (2018) reminds us that neither the university nor academic freedom can be disentangled from settler colonialism. Citing Craig Wilder (2014), that American institutions were never innocent or passive beneficiaries of colonial conquest and slavery, she claims that the academy never stood apart from the genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples, making the university an “accessory in the perpetuation of settler crimes against Black and Indigenous humanity” (Grande 2018: 48).

Universities in Australia are firmly rooted in these settler colonial logics of elimination and epistemic violence (Wolfe 2006; Bennett et al. 2023). The ongoing violence is not only evidenced by the retention of “nineteenth-century British colonial ideas and values from which [the academy] was initially derived” (Bennett et al. 2023: 2) and the ongoing dominance of white knowledge but by academic freedom

for a “common good” that continues to harm and obliterate Indigenous people, as part of Australia’s own ongoing genocide.

Academic Freedom in the Neoliberal University (Australia)

Neoliberalism has dominated Australian political thinking for forty years. Initially termed economic rationalism, it advocates deregulation, privatisation, and a reduced welfare state, placing the onus of survival on institutions (universities) and individuals (academics and students) in a market economy. For universities, this has led to funding cuts and new funding conditions, demonstrating that, despite its aim of shrinking the state, strong state intervention remains essential for its implementation.

While public universities in Australia have not been privatised, they have been culturally and operationally marketised. This has led to changes in governance, competition between universities over the market share of fee-paying students and for prestige-ranked funding, the proliferation of metrics and ranking scales, the commercialisation of teaching, and massive changes to the university labour force, forcing universities to rely on increasingly significant proportions of casual staff.

According to a recent document commissioned by the Australian government Universities Accord,³⁴ part of a process of review of Australian universities, we learn that 50-80% of undergraduate teaching is now performed by casual labourers employed by semester. Universities have also been found by law to be significantly underpaying casual staff, resulting in elite and other universities being required to pay substantial compensation for “wage theft.”

This increasing regulation and ranking of universities measures them against the most prestigious universities like Harvard, MIT, and Chicago, which Raewyn Connell (2016) calls “horrible institutions” whose privilege and arrogance are destructive to the trust and engagement necessary for quality university education. This horribleness is relentless. Connell points to its effects on universities in Australia – relentless commercialisation, relentless centralisation of power, and a flattening of university culture (*ibid.*).

In her article “Remaking Universities – Notes from the Sidelines of Catastrophe,” Raewyn Connell (2022) examines the postwar history of university policies and governance in Australia. While the university system in the 1950s and 1960s had its issues, including an “oligarchy of male professors” and the influence of the British Empire in shaping monocultural agendas amid Indigenous populations and postwar immigration, today’s situation is even more troubling.

Activism in the 1960s focused on the Vietnam War and Aboriginal campaigns, reflecting Australia’s shifting political climate. By the 1970s, a progressive national government had assumed control of university funding, replacing the variable policies of state and regional governments. The Whitlam government of the 1970s abolished university fees, established suburban and regional universities, and fostered

34 <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord> (accessed October 2024).

innovative teaching methods and curricula. This era also saw the emergence of new fields, such as urban studies, women's studies, and Asian studies.

By the mid-1980s, Australia's political culture had undergone a dramatic shift towards marketisation and deregulation. Towards the end of the decade, significant education reforms were implemented: university fees were reinstated, colleges were integrated into universities, and amalgamations took place. Most notably, university administrators were urged to adopt corporate management styles and practices.

These reforms aimed to expand student access through a privatised approach, and while student enrolments increased, public funding decreased proportionally. Tuition fees rose, leading to increased student debt, and challenges grew in the 1990s as universities were encouraged to seek funding outside of state support. The government encouraged international students as a revenue stream (Rea 2016). In 1989, 21,000 foreign students were enrolled in Australian universities. By 2016, that number had risen to 391,000. As of July 2024, there were 943,977 international students, which is 13% above pre-pandemic levels in 2019. This group now provides a significant portion of university funding, with less than 50% of funding coming from the government (Tiffen 2020). Education is now Australia's fourth largest "export" after coal, iron ore, and natural gas (Olsen 2024).

University governance has transformed accordingly in this corporatised environment, where education is packaged as a successful export commodity. Universities are now governed by councils of external members, many without university experience, appointed for the corporate knowledge and ethos they bring. Most university councils have only one staff member and one student member. Vice Chancellors now earn corporate-style salaries. In 2023, the average VC salary was \$1.07 million, with Monash University's VC earning the highest at \$1.6 million. As highlighted by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), this is approximately three times the salary of the Victorian Premier and more than twice that of the nation's Prime Minister.

The corporatised governance of Australian universities has also resulted in relentless competition both between institutions and within them (Rea 2016). Australia now has a "Group of Eight" universities that have positioned themselves as the sector's elite and have redefined universities as market-oriented, competing firms rather than cooperative parts of public service (Connell 2022).

It is not surprising, perhaps, that academic freedom is threatened in and by this corporate, marketised context. Amid growing distrust between staff and universities (*ibid.*), constraints on academic freedom arise from strict performance management, mass casualisation of the workforce, intensification of teaching requirements, demand for increasing levels of publication, and requirements to publish or not publish in specified journals.

Research funding is often tied to universities' strategic (competitive) interests or government priorities, making profitability and prestige foundational for Australian universities. Government interventions in research funding further complicate matters, as funding often hinges on compliance with specific requirements. Such heavy

reliance on external funding discourages open dialogue, leading to self-censorship among staff as they increasingly tailor their research programs to this funding model.

Funding cuts to education and the shift toward corporatised management reflect four decades of neoliberalism in Australia. Over the past two decades, this has been exacerbated by an intensified culture-war agenda waged most forcefully by the previous conservative government. Its so-called “Job Ready Graduate” package not only doubled fees for humanities and social sciences – arguing they offered a poor return on investment – but also targeted them for their critical teaching and research, which conservatives label “cultural Marxism.”

While academic freedom faces challenges from the management and corporate cultures of neoliberal universities, this environment also raises concerns about the future use and abuse of academic freedom. Attacks on critical thinking, critical studies, and solidarity politics extend beyond Australia and the university sector, although education institutions are primary targets. This global trend is evident in rising right-wing alliances opposing so-called “woke” ideologies, driven by racism, anti-immigration sentiment, anti-trans and LGBTQI discrimination, misogyny, Islamophobia, and antisemitism. This is especially critical at the collision point of neoliberalism and genocide.

Use and Abuse of Academic Freedom in a Time of Genocide?

As I write this, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) is threatening students with disciplinary action for distributing “Students for Palestine” leaflets on campus. The leaflets promote a forum titled “UTS Ties to Genocide,” where participants will discuss the university’s connections to corporations involved in manufacturing weapons and military technology. University security, acting on the Vice Chancellor’s instructions, claims the leaflets pose a threat to student safety due to the use of the word “genocide.” This incident adds to a troubling pattern of university management threatening and silencing students engaged in solidarity activities for Palestine. Recently, both the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Sydney have called the police to evict protesting students.

Students from the eleven encampments held in Australia have been threatened with suspension or expulsion and have been hauled before university committees to show cause why they shouldn’t be so disciplined. Meanwhile, students from the University of Melbourne have begun preparing a case referring university leadership, including the VC, to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for complicity in war crimes and genocide that have been committed by Israel.

Two recent and significant contributions from Australian scholars, Jumana Bayeh and Nick Reimer (2024) and Lana Tatour (2024), examine the connections between neoliberalism, academic freedom, and the renewed repression of teaching, research, and activism related to Palestine. They highlight that Australia is one of Israel’s most steadfast supporters, a relationship partly rooted in their shared histories and identities as settler colonies and clients of the United States. Support is

also bolstered by paid study tours to Israel for Australian politicians, academics, and businesspeople.

University neoliberal governance and aspirations for prestige and reputation have enabled the powerful Zionist lobby embedded in the Australian political establishment to influence Vice Chancellors and university councils (Bayeh and Reimer 2024). Much of this recent influence is part of what some term the new “antisemitism movement,” which is charged with conflating anti-Zionism with antisemitism, gaining traction through the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) 2016 working definition of antisemitism.³⁵

The controversy over the IHRA definition of antisemitism stems from a politicisation of its meaning. The broad consensus on the definition unravelled in the early twenty-first century, as Israel became central to discussions about Palestinian oppression. As a strategic response, the Israeli government began prioritising the fight against anti-Zionism internationally. A coordinated campaign ensued. Its most controversial element is its conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, which has been “instrumentalised to shield the Israeli government from criticism and to falsely frame pro-Palestinian activists as antisemitic” (Deckers and Coulter 2023: 733; see also Gordon 2024).

In Australia, the IHRA is sponsored and circulated by the Australian Parliamentary Friends of the IHRA, a group of politicians who quickly urged university Vice Chancellors to adopt the controversial definition. These parliamentarians and their Zionist allies have exerted considerable pressure on universities to advance the definition; a trend mirrored globally. Tatour (2024) notes that while only a small number of universities have adopted the IHRA definition in the U.S. and none in Canada, 75% of universities in the UK adopted it after the education minister threatened to withhold funding from those that refused.

A handful of Australian universities have adopted the IHRA definition, including the University of Melbourne, Monash, Wollongong, Macquarie, and Southern Cross University. Several others have been explicitly unwilling to adopt it. La Trobe University has agreed to adopt the definition, although without the text on the 11 examples of antisemitism. The two most controversial examples include “claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour” and “requiring of Israel behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.” To call Israel an apartheid state, therefore, or to chant “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” is deemed antisemitic and a threat to the academic freedom of Jewish staff and students.

Kenneth Stern, the author of the original definition, claimed in 2019 that it was being weaponised by right-wing Jews and was never intended to silence speech. However, this is precisely what’s happening on campuses in Australia, where the definition is primarily advanced as a protection of the academic and civic freedoms of Jewish academics and students. As Tatour (2024) points out, the IHRA defini-

35 <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism> (accessed October 2024).

tion affects not only universities that adopt it but also shapes public conversations about Israel and Palestine more broadly. This has created a McCarthyist ambience on campuses across the West, which is amplified by the media's constant and cavalier conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

The atmosphere of silencing extends beyond labelling protests, academic boycotts, and student encampments as antisemitic. It infiltrates Palestine scholarship and teaching, aligning with right-wing attacks on critical race theory, Indigenous studies, gender studies, and queer studies. At UNSW, Zionist students recently cited the IHRA definition to request the removal of Patrick Wolfe's settler colonialism article from a syllabus because it names Israel and Zionism as settler colonialism. At a Law and Society conference held in Brisbane in December 2023, complaints of imbalance targeted a panel on Gaza and International Law (Tatour 2024: 5). Palestinian sociologist Randa Abdel-Fattah faced severe criticism from Zionist groups for participating in a solidarity and healing event for Palestinian children. They demanded that her university fire her and the federal government withdraw her research funding. The ambient uncertainty and fear of the neoliberal university evolves quickly into an atmosphere of violence in the time of genocide (Tatour 2024).

A litany of silences and violences in the neoliberal university and its increasingly authoritarian management in the time of the IHRA and genocide abound in Australia. Bayeh and Reimer (2024) detail numerous examples of interference, attempted silencing, and intrusion into curricula and research at Australian universities. They also highlight two critical points: First, since October 7, 2023, supporters of Israel have inundated university administrations with complaints, making brazen attempts to censor Palestinian activists (2024: 441). In doing so, they have attempted "to harness the coercive powers of the university authorities to suppress pro-Palestinian campus voices" (Bayeh and Reimer 2024: 445). Second, while an activist "academic Zionism" claims that boycott campaigns and anti-Zionist expressions violate academic freedom, most of these accusations of antisemitism are found to be baseless. However, obstructionism is a principal tactic of this activism, consuming university resources and silencing faculty, thereby issuing serious political consequences to the university and its inhabitants.

Conclusion

In her recent article on academic freedom, scholar and former university union leader Jeannie Rea asserts that "academic freedom is a responsibility, not a right" (Rea 2021: 28). Sensitive to fears of staff and students who feel silenced and self-censoring in the neoliberal university, she says university communities must not be intimidated by claims that exercising their academic freedom will cause harm to reputation of their universities, though it may threaten careers and livelihoods. Drawing on her experiences with Scholars at Risk,³⁶ she notes that "speaking out is unlikely to land

³⁶ <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/> (accessed October 2024).

you in jail in Australia” (2021: 28). She acknowledges the ambient time and insists, “[b]ut still, don’t we have a responsibility to stand up, act up, and back up others? Academic freedom is of little use as a concept if we do not exercise it; we must also fight the conditions that strangle it – in Australia and in solidarity with university workers and students internationally” (ibid.: 30).

Connell (2022) grieves for the once flawed but flourishing university that was, but also sees the reasons for anger among a whole generation of university workers and poses the need to organise. Acknowledging that it won’t be easy to turn around, Connell suggests that the Good University is still possible. Both Butler (2017) and Scott (2024) argue in defence of academic freedom and its role in encouraging critical thinking and academic debate. Butler argues, however, that academic freedom needs to be rethought to link it with broader struggles for substantive freedom or “we will have to ask whether it has become the instrument for modes of state and economic power that seek the erosion of a collective life for some...” One thinks of those in Palestine who now have no universities to attend and whose lives have been obliterated, their freedoms to university and collective lives expunged. Scholasticide as part of genocide is a call to academics to see academic freedom as a responsibility.

I find it hard to share the hope or optimism expressed by others. Like Grande (2018) and her colleagues (de Oliveira, Stein, Ahkenhaw, and Hunt 2015), I often wonder whether the university is beyond reform – whether, like modernity, it is inherently violent, exploitative, and unsustainable and should instead be allowed to die, palliatively. There’s an argument that any reforms to the current system will only reproduce it. Hospicing the system to its death, however, is not a passive endeavour. It involves “sitting with a system in decline, learning from its history, offering palliative care, seeing oneself in that which is dying, attending to the integrity of the process...” (de Oliveira et al. 2015: 28). I’m not sure what this means or what it would entail. It feels exacting and burdensome, and I’m doubtful I’d want to engage in this process, yet I find myself drawn to the idea.

In the meantime, if freedom is just another word for “nothing left to lose,” we do, as Rea says, have a responsibility to act as part of our academic freedom. Despite universities weaponising academic freedom to silence Palestinian protests in defence of Zionism, the courage and resilience of the Palestinian resistance are inspirational. The impact of student encampments has been internationally monumental, and academics standing in solidarity with students and Palestinians is where we can collectively rethink academic freedom and the university, in this time, together.

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Academia as Victim, and Accomplice, of Western Colonial Neoliberalism

If people are free, freedom is a non-existent issue. Obviously, the very need to address academic freedom in a domain defined by critique, i.e., free-thinking, is an oxymoron; academia is not free. Although it is usually considered an island of freedom in unfree social waters, academia is not a specific or isolated place of freedom of any kind. It is rather a hierarchical institution of ranks and orders. However, academic culture, through the admittedly liminal, at least in its epistemological design, mutual knowledge production of professors and students, creates academic *communitas* essentially characterized by an illusion of unquestionable freedom of thinking.

Nevertheless, academia has always been an integral part of wider society. What we nowadays understand as academia, i.e., universities as the centers in producing and distributing new knowledge, appeared in specific historical and social conditions. The very first universities were established in Islamic North Africa. These universities, Al Quaraouiyine in Fez, Morocco, established in 859, and Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, established in 970, were the product of Islamic striving for knowledge and truth to provide substantial knowledge for people to address the Almighty. Meanwhile, the first European universities, established two centuries later, aimed to provide knowledge to rule the world in a secular and spiritual way, domestic and remote. It is still the case. Humboldt's reform in the 19th century was among the last substantial achievements in this approach, making the (nation-)state and academia interdependent. At the same time, American universities brought forth the dependence of universities on the "free" market. The European Bologna reforms of the 1990s brought forth flexible dependence of universities from both (nation-)states and markets.

Developments in past decades, and especially in the last few years, are a direct outcome of these recent reforms. The Bologna reform was one of the most unprecedented political interventions in academia. Understanding academia as an individual and collective investment positioned academia within the business landscape. Tuition fees and project funding transformed universities into businesses. These processes in making academia neoliberal are visible in the imposition of quantitative evaluation of research work and regular institutional and teaching evaluations. The brutal result of this transformation was visible recently with security measures at autonomous university territories against student and academic pro-Palestinian protesters. Academics outside academia face even more severe measures. It recently happened to the retired Jewish professor Haim Bresheeth, who was arrested after his

speech at a protest in London on November 4, 2024, and is facing charges “under the Terrorism Act 2000 for ‘making a hate speech’” (MEE Staff 2024).

There are other examples of suppressing free speech, whatever that means in academia. What about using free expression to cause harm, especially through racist or sexist statements? There is no reason to exempt academics from responsibilities given in wider society. Processes in which scandalous ideas, like racist or sexist ones, are deemed unacceptable are evident in the many examples of dismissed academics. A good example is the Nobel Prize winner James Watson, who was dismissed due to his sexist and racist attitudes (BBC 2019). However, the public almost did not notice the dismissal of more than a hundred Russian scientists from CERN in 2024 (Taylor 2024).

The relationship between the state, free market (i.e., capital), and universities is extremely complex. Neoliberalism seemingly made it easier. It made its long way from academia into wider society and back to academia. As an economic and social paradigm, neoliberalism began in academia and, more specifically, at the University of Chicago.

After the neoliberal doctrine was implemented in Chile and introduced under the rule of Reagan and Thatcher, it became a common newspeak. This is the social environment in which the most recent academic reforms began. The Magna Charta Universitatum (Great Charter of Universities) of 1988, a document marking the 800th anniversary of the University of Bologna, reflects the spirit of the time and could not have been anything other than a Eurocentric document, containing at least some baggage of still preserved Western colonial and racist representations. In this sense, we should consider the differences between the Magna Charta Universitatum and the UNESCO declaration as more important than the similarities.

The text “‘Rogue Viewpoints’ or More...? The Idea Of Academic Freedom Today” brings a discussion about academic culture and freedom today, a time of neoliberal capitalism and genocide. Its main topic is education in the 21st century, scientific research and its autonomy, and the responsibility of researchers in a time of total standardization.

The reason for the discussion is the termination of the employment contract of Professor Ghassan Hage at the Max Planck Institute in Germany. It is important to understand that this is not a university. Research institutions are much younger than universities. They were created either as laboratories and research centers in business or as basic and applied research institutes established by the state. They were especially common in socialist countries. Research institutes, as institutions, are obviously less independent than universities.

Academia is not excluded from the rest of society. It consists of universities, other higher education institutions, and research institutes – private, public, and state-funded. Even in normal times, state-funded research institutes have significantly less autonomy than universities. Their position in academia is very tricky: they are established to provide new knowledge, but they are not completely independent in defining their research. The founders and providers of research funds define it,

regardless of the wider or narrower research aims in specific areas of research. Their logic of operation is fundamentally different from that of universities, and they are much more dependent on the state and economy's financing in the production of knowledge than universities.

This is the reason why the problem of academic freedom cannot be reduced only to the issue of individual freedoms and academic freedoms. The matter is much more complex and includes social responsibility and engagement. Perhaps Gramsci would also have something to add an organic intellectual (see Gramsci 1971: 14–15). We must take into consideration much broader relationships between politics, the ruling ideology, and science/scholarship. What if it is precisely the funding of scientific and scholarly research that is finally completing the totalitarian dimensions of neoliberalism?

Academia is a sphere of constant reform and intervention, which ranges from the production of knowledge for the knowledge's sake and the development of all fields of knowledge and arts to providing highly specialized professional education for very narrow skills. In today's academia, the general production of knowledge for its own sake and general research are disappearing. Some recent processes, e.g., the so-called Bologna reform, have killed the classical Humboldtian model and perhaps even the inherited academic culture of medieval universities. Under the decisions made by European ministers for education, the largest part of the higher education system should transform into career vocational schools, while the universal credit system paved the way for the standardization of student populations around Europe. This standardization, not only with ECTS credits, kills critical thinking. Should we defend critical thinking precisely because it is not congruent with neoliberal academia?

This is why, in the final part of this intervention, I will try to reevaluate critical thinking, the very foundation of the development of any knowledge. Critical thought somehow does not get the attention it deserves. It is not just the thought of "outlaws" but the very foundation of the thought of free humanity. One form of it is methodological doubt, and the other is the right to disagree. The first is the foundation of science, and the second is the foundation of the humanities. And it is deeply charged with interest.

Kant did not have any other choice than to write separately about pure reason, practical reason, and judgment (see Kant 1993, 1999, 2019). What is important is that pure and practical reason are "interested" kinds of reasoning, and he did not write about disinterestedness until writing on judgment. It was exactly the idea of interest that brought his profound thinking into antinomies. When writing about practical reason, instrumentality, i.e., usefulness, was a negative and not a positive "value" for him. Kant did not write about epistemology and knowledge but rather about thought and reason. From this perspective, it is a real paradox that he wrote about anthropology as an empirical science (see Kant 1996). However, what we need nowadays, more than ever, is theory.

Academia provides a very powerful tool to expand the scope of knowledge. We must understand (and use) it in both ways, etymologically, as observations and

reports of envoys at annual rituals in other *polises*, as well as in its current sense of a tool of analysis and understanding. Due to neoliberal quantification in the evaluation of scientific production and academic production, it has become practically obsolete nowadays in regard to its aim at producing knowledge for its own sake rather than applied knowledge or providing measurable scores for academics. This is why theory is nowadays either expelled from academia or mostly replaced with a zombie-like, incomprehensible scholastic mumble that, if needed at all, is intended to provide purely applicative professional skills to students.

Dunja Rihtman Auguštin identifies Bausinger's "*Theoriefeindlichkeit*," inducing fear of theory (Rihtman-Auguštin 2001: 127), as the attitude of scientists under totalitarianism. As far as I am concerned, all quasi-theories of today (from Deleuzean to Latourian and ontological attitudes) are anti-theories that arise from fear of the totalitarianization of today's neoliberal intellectual market. Perhaps this would be a possible direction of thinking about the case that is not a case.

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

Senka Božić-Vrbancić

Tomislav Oroz

First of all, we would like to express our gratitude for the comments received in what we consider to be an extremely important discussion, as well as to the editorial board of *Etnološka tribina*, which provided us with a platform for this discussion, and especially to editor Danijela Birt, who coordinated all our correspondence in an exceptionally encouraging and effective way. We also thank the reviewers and regret that their reviews cannot be part of this discussion, as they not only reflect on our initial text but also raise important questions for future debates on this topic. The initial text was written with the aim of starting a discussion on the issue of academic freedom, given that the conditions in which we work are changing at a tremendous pace under the influence of neoliberal policies that have various effects and forms depending on location and context, while also sharing some common characteristics globally. Due to the shortness of the text, we decided to focus on what we partially recognized as common global characteristics (speaking of the Global North). However, given the complexity of the topic and its connections with other socio-cultural issues of today, we felt that our text took on the form of a brief report. Despite our problem-focused highlighting of the role of a rogue viewpoint in the understanding of academic freedom today, it was marked by a certain linearity of narrative. Thus, we understand the concerns of Atila Lukić, Gordan Maslov, and Paul Stubbs, who warn that reflections on academic freedom must not fall into the trap of (self-)essentialization, which brings a threat of conceptual petrification or locates the dark chords of the neoliberal present in imaginary landscapes of a “better” and “prettier” past. By returning to Humboldt, we aimed to point out the specific context within which the modern idea of the university and academic freedoms emerged while emphasizing that, from its inception, this concept has evolved due to historical circumstances and diverse localities. We see these changes as a type of antagonism, both within the academic community and society. The issue of critical thinking is central to understanding academic freedom or, as Butler argues, to understanding the idea of democracy and the social. Critical thinking, of course, does not emerge in a vacuum; it is enabled by a specific historical context, a contingent historical accumulation that forms conventions and subject positions reflecting the multiple influences of social power (2009: 788). Therefore, critical thinking is always, in some sense, a rogue viewpoint, as it questions the norms that set the boundaries of

what is “understandable” and what is “speakable.” More than that, it has the potential to create new imaginaries. In Butler’s words, it is more than merely taking a stance toward authority; it implies “[elaborating] a position for oneself outside the ontological jurisdiction of that authority” (2009: 790). In this sense, a rogue viewpoint lies outside a given normative framework, and by its very act of critical approach and questioning the legitimacy of certain frameworks, it becomes “problematic” within the political frameworks that allow it. At the same time, for Butler, it is crucial when discussing not only academic freedom but also the issue of liberal democracy in general. Naturally, this broad conception of the idea of critical thinking and rogue viewpoints raises many questions, including questions of “freedom,” “law,” “state,” “liberal democracy,” “the possibility of new alternative imaginaries,” etc. Therefore, the topics our commentators raise are essential to the debate that we hope will continue beyond this space provided by *Etnološka tribina*. Given our length constraints, we believe responding to each comment individually would be unproductive due to the breadth and complexity of the issues raised. Instead of a conclusion, we will attempt to shed further light on some of the views we presented, which have emerged as blind spots in our own perspectives on academic freedoms, and connect them to our commentators’ views through the overlapping problem nodes.

Let us begin with the question of freedom – what kind of freedom are we actually talking about when discussing academic freedom? What does it entail, what meanings are inscribed within it, and how is this ideal connected to the development of liberal democracy? In their reflections on liberalism and the concept of freedom, Joan Scott (2019) and Judith Butler (2009, 2017, 2022) are both, in their own ways, partly inspired by a Foucauldian approach. This approach views liberalism as a political rationality, a form of governance characterized by a logic of seeking its own principle of self-limitation. This logic operates according to interest and cost-benefit calculations in relation to unlimited economic progress. Such a mode of governance can only exist and function if a certain number of freedoms exist: “freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell, the free exercise of property rights, freedom of discussion, possible freedom of expression, and so on.” (Foucault 2016: 71). It is important to emphasize that Foucault speaks of a discourse of freedom, rather than freedom as some universal or absolute ideal that one might strive to fulfill over time (see comments by Maslov and Lukić). Therefore, the discourse of freedom always pertains to forms of knowledge that produce it, but it also generates forms of knowledge as well as professional institutions and social spaces to which it relates. In this sense, it could be said that the very core of liberal practices consists of establishing variable relations between the production of freedom and what, through these production processes, is exposed to restriction and danger. In Foucault’s words:

Liberalism is not acceptance of freedom; it proposes to manufacture it constantly, to arouse it and produce it, with, of course, the system of constraints and the problems of cost raised by this production. [...] The game of freedom and security is at the very heart of this new governmental reason. (2016: 72)

The interplay of freedom and security in various parts of the world generates, in multiple ways, a “political culture of danger,” which leads to processes of control and regulation over the population. These processes permeate all aspects of society (institutional and non-institutional), play out on both micro and macro levels, have complex effects, and are continuously reinscribed at these levels. However, it is crucial to emphasize that, in the liberal art of governance, control and regulation do not function as counterweights to freedom. Quite the opposite: control and regulation produce various freedoms subject to a constant process of change. The changes brought about by the neoliberal restructuring of society (e.g., reducing the social role of the state, deregulating capital, privatizing public goods, promoting radical market freedom and individual freedom to “independently” determine one’s own well-being) have further complicated the interplay of freedom and security. They have created a social atmosphere in which it is normalized for each individual to exercise their freedoms in a way that ensures they can care for themselves. All this leads to profound life insecurity and precariousness, which has become the norm rather than the exception. The distribution of precariousness is not uniform, nor does everyone experience it in the same way (Lorey 2015; Berlant 2011, 2012; Puar 2012), varying from location to location. But what is striking is that it is always shaped by an environment in which everything is commodified and reduced to numbers, efficiency (audit culture), and profit. Our interest lies precisely in the effect of precariousness and audit culture on academic institutions and, thus, the ideal of academic freedom. The ideal of academic freedom, and we emphasize the “ideal” aspect, from its very inception (Humboldt), has been marked by duality. As Scott notes, at the institutional level, it is defined by a political framework; at the same time, this framework should enable critical thinking that is independent of power relations within society (2019: 97). As Duško Petrović points out in his commentary, this paradox is crucial to understanding academic freedom, as it relies on a “limitation imposed ‘externally,’” yet is inherent to political society. Therefore, according to Petrović, views suggesting that the survival of the democratic order depends on academic freedoms are highly problematic, as they overlook this duality, which points to their mutual construction. In this aspect, we fully agree with Petrović, but not with his reading of Joan Scott’s work. For us, by pointing out the connection between the concepts of academic freedom and liberal democracy and by claiming that the loss of academic freedom directly endangers democracy and the common good, Scott indeed points to their mutual constructiveness and productivity in the Foucauldian sense – their mutual formation, which, among other things, enables the struggle for the construction of various meanings attributed to these concepts.³⁷ What seems important to us in today’s context, which Scott emphasizes, is the increasing conflation of the idea of academic freedom with freedom of speech (2019). One of the effects of this

37 For Scott, the common good has no universal meaning, nor can there be a single common good. The idea that universities contribute to the common good, though problematic, does not diminish the need to uphold the ideal of academic freedom as Scott believes, much like Butler, that the capacity for critical thinking is essential for bringing about social change.

conflation is the loss of the collective character that the concept of academic freedom carries; reducing it to freedom of speech entirely denies it any academic legitimacy. Critical thinking is reduced, at best, to just one of the various opinions circulating in the public sphere. Consequently, it provokes neither academic debate nor any other debate. The opposite is true: as it is labeled as “biased” (see the comment by Ines Prica) and “destructive,” it serves as a technique to silence and intimidate the academic community, reducing it to “culture wars” and degrading it in various ways. As Maree Pardy reflects on the situation in Australia, she states that the question arises whether defining academic freedom on humanistic principles makes any sense in such circumstances, as the institutional framework (the university) has mutated to the extent that corporatization has become indisputable, knowledge is commodified and treated as a particular property that must be delivered to students, like any other good with a use-value. Academic staff are reduced to the position of those who deliver a certain type of knowledge already characterized as indisputable and “valuable,” while critical thinking, equated with freedom of speech, is perceived as mere moralizing and ideologizing and as an attack on academic freedom. This substitution of meanings enables racist and misogynistic views to be legitimized, violence to be perpetrated, and opponents to be silenced, repressed, and censored, all in the name of academic freedom, especially when discussing certain topics such as, at this moment, the issue of genocide in Gaza.

The legitimacy of state violence by Israel in Gaza has highlighted deeper institutional issues concerning the understanding of academic freedom. The case of Ghasan Hage in Germany is, in our view, not unique; it is just one of many examples where a scholar, by voicing critical views on the state of Israel, is accused of violating the principle of academic freedom or even promoting racism and antisemitism. Although Hage’s case garnered global attention and elicited strong support from the academic community, the reaction produced little concrete effect. Maslov and Lukić discuss the unique context in Germany for critical perspectives on Israel, attributing it to the postwar “German guilt” and responsibility for the Holocaust, which has resulted in Germany’s unconditional support for Israel. However, it is also important to note that Germany officially adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism in 2017, a definition that, as Pardy points out, has been controversially politicized in Australia, as it has enabled the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism. Despite its controversies, this definition has been adopted by various academic institutions worldwide, leading to arrests of students and academic staff who have supported student protests over the Israeli offensive in Gaza. Lukić and Maslov argue that the Hage case illustrates a mutation in the political logic regulating freedoms, potentially signaling the onset of a new post-liberal societal restructuring, as “freedom itself was not in question, but rather the way it was used.” Referring to a statement by the Max Planck Society on the Hage case, Lukić and Maslov note that the primary concern with Hage’s social media comments was the politicization deemed inappropriate for the university’s mission or what is considered legitimate academic inquiry. Thus, the institutional

framework becomes the subject of enunciation, not only defining what is correct or incorrect but also assuming the responsibility to defend universal values in whose name it speaks. This is how the Max Planck Society self-constitutes itself, thus precluding any dialogue, as the institutional framework becomes the subject of speech rather than a space within which discourse unfolds. Therefore, it is understandable why Pardy questions whether defining academic freedom on humanistic principles makes sense in today's context, where the institutional framework has changed so fundamentally. Hage himself noted several years ago in an interview with *Etnološka tribina* that critical thought today has become impossible within the institutional confines of universities; it can only be realized in resistance to these frameworks. In his view, the feeble resistance of employees stems from various factors, one of which is financial security within a general climate of life precarity and uncertainty. Rajko Muršič thus concludes that critical thinking, now exiled from the security once provided by academic freedom, has become a byproduct of neoliberal totalitarianism that favors knowledge's applicability and utility in the market economy. In this totalitarian dimension of neoliberalism, justified by the processes of standardization and skill development, critical thinking has lost its connection to its Kantian origins, where utility was initially characterized as a negative value. The transformation of utility from a negative to a desirable attribute of knowledge becomes a kind of zombie-like murmur, as Muršič warns, a syndrome of academic freedoms now conditioned by the measurability of academic insights and their economic justification. Prica also speaks about this type of passivity in the Croatian context, where the neoliberalization of universities has taken a somewhat different path, characterized by the prolonged mythic transition from socialism to capitalism. Prica highlights the bureaucratization of the system, the introduction of projectification as a control mechanism, and the simulation of competitiveness through "centers of excellence." In public discourse, "*uhljebnništvo*" (a pejorative term for public-sector parasitism) is a widespread perception encompassing the entire public sector, including universities, with the humanities often stigmatized as socially unproductive. Yet, these circumstances also inspire new forms of "metasolidarity," becoming a place for collective struggle. Similarly, Stubbs discusses the potential for new imaginaries coming from the periphery, countering dominant hegemonic narratives. Academic freedom is a battleground, and as such, it is not a static concept. Therefore, it is essential to consider how, when, and in what context it is invoked as a concept, whether it is being "attacked" or perceived as having to be "defended." Additionally, given the various exclusions that have marked the concept since its inception (based on racial, gender, ethnic, and class lines), based on the context and era, it is crucial to examine which exclusions exist in today's context. Does the concept include students and all university staff, or is it exclusive to academic personnel? Does it entail the concept of responsibility for the academic community to engage with the broader public? Stubbs suggests rethinking the ideas of a "pluriversity" and "critical pedagogy," as well as considering existing alternatives, such as the university within the Mondragon collective experiment in Spain.

Now, let us return to the title of our initial text: Can critical thinking, as a rogue viewpoint, open up new possibilities? Or is something more required?

Butler's idea of a rogue viewpoint inspired us to initiate this discussion, and while we agree with Butler that a rogue viewpoint has the potential to create new imaginaries, we would like to conclude by considering the potential of anthropological critical thought to open up new possibilities beyond those defined by capitalism and the liberal tradition from which the concept of academic freedom itself comes from. The rogue viewpoint belongs to the realm of critical thinking, but as Hage notes, critical thinking is primarily reflexive; "it enables us to reflexively move outside of ourselves such that we can start seeing ourselves in ways we could not have possibly seen ourselves, our culture or our society before". This implies reflecting on how we are shaped by history, on the relations of power and domination that reproduce a certain order, and, most importantly, enables us to consider possibilities for resistance and even subversion of the dominant system. However, anthropological thought, at least in its beginnings, focused on "people outside modernity," those who were "different" in their understanding and experience of reality. What Hage wants to point out is that, despite the discipline's issues, its connections with colonialism, and the ways it wrote about "people outside modernity," anthropology as a discipline has indeed allowed insights into alternative ways of being. This insight not only allowed for various interpretations – some of which, as we know, were also racist – but it also opened up the possibility of "stepping outside ourselves" in a way that allows us to be "different from ourselves," reminding us continuously that we can be other than what we are. Alternative ways of being exist today as well, often labeled as "minor," and what is far more important than their interpretation or comparison to the dominant system is exposing "the possibility of us being 'other than what we are'" (Hage 2012). In short, critical anthropology should always pay attention to alternative worlds, which, although often invisible, are actually all around us. They emerge in the cracks of Western modernity but are not integrated into the dominant reality. This way of thinking holds transformative potential because, alongside critical thinking and a rogue viewpoint, it considers alternative ways of being, creates new unstable relations between the present and future, opens various temporalities,³⁸ or, as Lauren Berlant would say, enables a critical stance not only toward the dominant imagined future (and past) but also processes of unlearning. These processes, regardless of how slow they may be, open the possibility of intervening in the production and reproduction of the dominant. And if we return to the question of academic freedom and what is happening with the idea of the university today, perhaps the key question is not whether we should defend academic freedom but rather how, through a pedagogy of unlearning, we might embrace the challenges of this transformative process, which may initially seem like a failure. If our aim is to unlearn the normative that normalizes the "unlivable violences and inequities we [...] live with" (Berlant

³⁸ Of course, this way of thinking is not unique to anthropology as an academic discipline, but it partially arises from its tradition, as evidenced by the current ontological turn.

in Tyler and Loizidou 2000: 501), then these challenges can be overcome through openness to alternative ways of being that foster thinking not predetermined by dominant rules, but are ever-surprising and, though without guarantees, carry the potential for change.

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