

Academic freedom: historical perspectives on current controversies

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Two outstanding German universities celebrated their anniversaries in the late 1930s, Heidelberg in 1936; Göttingen the year after. Norway's only university, The University of Oslo, politely declined the invitation to Heidelberg (Sem Fure 2011: 55). Little is known from the academic collegium's discussion of the matter, but in several European countries the invitation was lively debated. The universities of Stockholm, Cambridge, London and Basel – among others – boycotted, arguing that academic freedom no longer existed in Germany. The philosopher and supporter of the Nazi regime Martin Heidegger had declared its irrelevance already in 1933, and in the mid-1930s German universities collaborated closely with the regime (Östling 2016: 85). In 1936 universities were about to be emptied of Jews, communists, socialists and anyone who did not commit themselves to the superiority of “the Arya'n race”.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the answer to the invitation to Heidelberg was different. Many universities accepted it, among them some of the most renowned: Harvard, Cornell, Illinois, Yale, and others. It was not due to ignorance about political developments in Germany; to participate in celebrations was conceived an academic tradition with no political consequence (Clarke, Ch. 1-2).

Why do I start this talk about academic freedom, history and current controversies, with an example from the 1930s? Because it illustrates so nicely that the issue that currently causes controversies at many universities – boycotts – belong in a long history of competing understandings of what academic freedom implies. It furthermore illustrates that academic freedom, while important to the day-to-day activity in academic institutions– is particularly important in times when decency, democracy, human rights and peace is bluntly violated. In times like ours, and the 1930s, in other words.

I will continue using Germany as an historical example, and add some others, before I turn to current debates about academic freedom and boycott. Towards the end, I will briefly comment on controversies surrounding ‘woke’ culture, identity-politics, and no platforming – debates

often framed as issues not only of freedom of speech, but also of academic freedom. Norway is at the center, with public reports, op-eds, and academic and journalistic texts as the main empirical material, supplemented with material from other European countries and the US. I have been inspired by a steadily increasing number of scientific articles on these topics, philosophical, historical and juridical, but with no ambition of a more systematic review.

Celebrating Nazism, supporting “silent opposition”- or boycotting?

Participating in the Heidelberg jubilee was not an act without political consequence; the celebration was cast in the service of the Nazi state. Guests took part in the academic procession through the city “under a giant golden swastika and a bronze statue of a Nazi eagle” (Clarke, Ch. 1). Celebrated was not Humboldtian ideals but the nazi takeover –as the philosopher Ernst Krieck said in his greetings: “We do not know of or recognize truth for truth’s sake or science for science’s sake (...). We now seek a science that forms the whole human character in accordance with the great racial and political task before us (...) (Clarke, Ch. 6)”.

Even without social media, news from the celebration was widely spread, and with that in mind, it is surprising that not only American representatives, but even Oslo’s new rector, Didrik Arup Seip, next year packed his suitcase and went to Göttingen’s 200-years celebration (Sem Fure 2011: 55). Students had urged him not to go and academic refugees from Germany arriving in Oslo served as living evidence of current violations of academic ideals. University-historian Jorunn Sem Fure has found no documents that illuminate why he went, but, obviously, he disagreed with both his predecessor and his students (Sem Fure, 2011:56). One of his considerations, however, was most likely that Germany had always been the University of Oslo’s main partner and academic ideal.

From Franco-Spain to South Africa

The end of WW2 did not cause the fall of every European dictator, and the first post-war boycott-issue that some might still remember, concerns Spain. Intellectuals and scientists who did not adhere to the Franco-regime’s ideology had been systematically removed (Brydan 2019). However, UN-isolation ended in 1955 and in the 1960s the US initiated a closer relationship with Spanish universities. This was not necessarily popular in Spain, and well-

known intellectuals, e.g. Jean Paul Sartre, supported cultural boycott. So did Pablo Picasso, who did not allow his works to be exhibited in Spain (Garcia, 2013). They, and others, introduced a norm of personal-political behavior that was to become influential: not to collaborate with fascists. In Scandinavia, campaigns to boycott travels to Spain, also for reason of studies or research collaboration, were common not only among left-leaning students and university staff, but by a larger segment of the population.

To my knowledge, however, organized academic boycotts were not common – unlike in our next example, South Africa, the country that historically is closest associated to academic boycotts and issues of academic freedom. The boycott-history is interpreted in very different ways by different parties and in academic literature (see e.g. Hyslop, Vally & Hassim 2006), but some common features can be identified. ANC (African National Congress) asked for boycott since 1958, to isolate South African universities and weaken support for the apartheid-state. The global response was uneven but support increased after the Soweto-massacre in 1960, when the police killed 69 for having demonstrated against the regime. UN condemnation and bans followed, and in 1964 after two white South African academics were banned from teaching at South African universities, around 500 British professors declared their will to boycott universities that practiced racial discrimination and violated academic freedom (Kluge 2024). Slowly, support for boycotts in the form of restrictions on travels, conferences, invitations, common research and publications grew.

In 1977 UN asked member states to prohibit weapon sales and somewhat later implement cultural and sports boycott. Norway passed an act on boycott in 1987 – but left to the universities themselves to decide on academic boycotts. Norwegian universities followed official policy, and boycott became the rule in many European countries (Kluge 2024). The common argument was that South African universities were based on racist ideology and practices with strong links to the economic sector, the state and apartheid, and were consequently not acceptable partners.

Was the support of academic boycott of South Africa unanimous? Within South Africa, faculty at black universities in general supported boycott, while the white majority, again in general, saw it as a violation of academic freedom (Hyslop, Vally & Hassim, 2006; Haricombe & Lancaster, 1995: 100-101). There seems to be little disagreement, however, that boycott put pressure on the mainly white universities. Outside South Africa, support of boycott was strong, but arguments concerning free exchange of knowledge and people in the interest of science and academic freedom were common (Nordkvelle 1990). Besides, a boycott could

also hurt South-Africans against apartheid, while those against boycott would most likely continue to collaborate. Some wanted a selective boycott; to continue collaboration with those who were against apartheid, others meant that would be both difficult and discriminatory.

Boycott was a strong symbolic manifestation of anti-apartheid. Did it also help in bringing the regime down? It fell in 1990. The verdict is not unanimous, but the general agreement seems to be that economic boycott was the most effective means, but that cultural, economic and academic boycotts – together with an increasingly strong internal opposition – was what in the end brought the apartheid regime down. Thus, academic boycott was one of several factors.

Recent boycott-issues

Before 1990, academic contact with the Soviet Union was not widespread, but perestroika and glasnost transformed international academic relations. Throughout the 1990s and the first two decades of 20th century many academic bonds were tied. European institutional bonds were commonly untied after the Russian war on Ukraine in February 2022 – while, on the contrary, they were little affected by the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

In March 2022, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research froze its educational and research agreements with Russia – like a host of European states. Norwegian universities were asked to assess researcher-to-researcher collaboration on a case-by-case basis, while institutional agreements should be put on hold; an important difference between the two. Communication from the Ministry about its decision did however give the impression that freezing was an order, which it was not (Nystuen, Strømme & Hellestveit, 30062024). In practice, institutional collaboration is non-existent today while individual collaboration might take place.

There has been no similar official initiative in Norway following Hamas' attack on Israel and Israel's war on Gaza, and the situation is basically the same in EU/other Europe states. At one arena, Horizon Europe, collaboration seems to increase, not least in Norway, with 72 agreements today involving Israel against 54 only a year ago (*Khrono*, 28032026). There might thus be not only an academic, but an economic motive for continuing collaboration with Israeli institutions; ending collaboration with Israel might reduce funding from Horizon Europe.

There are currently some EU-initiatives to curb Israeli participation in some research (EU Commission Press Release, 28072025), and students and individual scholars have demanded academic boycott due to war crimes, possible genocide and segregationist policies. Some universities have restricted their contacts with Israeli institutions; frozen institutional agreement and/or made decisions not to sign new. Globally, 2025 also saw an increase in academic institutions boycotting Israeli universities and in addition, an increasing number of academics commit personal boycotts when their institutions do not (*Guardian* 13092025) – like what happened with the Franco regime.

Most Norwegian university leaders seem to oppose institutional academic boycott of Israel, and as a rule, it is institutional boycott proponents ask for. Opposition is not necessarily very strong, though: 6 of 5 representatives voted against boycott in the Oslo university board 11.03.2026. Of the majority, 4 were external board members and only 2 representing academia

As a start, one might identify two opposing positions: at the one side that academic freedom is a fundamental right and boycott always wrong (*Graver, Aftenposten* 060424), at the other side, that other values and rights are more important than academic freedom when faced with possible genocide, crimes against humanity, violations of human rights and international law (*Solbakk, Khrono* 23042024). The fundamentalist position is also countered by reference to Israel's destruction of academic infrastructure on Gaza, and violations of Palestinian academic life and freedom; like the early boycott of South-Africa, such violations legitimize boycott.

Digging somewhat deeper, as I have done in the Norwegian case, we find that arguments pertaining to academic freedom are more nuanced and, also, that references to academic freedom are used at both sides. Three arguments that I believe are relevant also internationally stand out, but arguments do, of course, vary between countries and change in time.

First, boycott implies taking a “political stand”, which universities shall not – academic freedom means there shall be room for the entire specter of political positions – no one shall be excluded. There are several arguments against this, ranging from whatever stance taken is political to academic freedom gives universities the right to choose. The Norwegian institution for human rights emphasizes that according to Norwegian law, universities might make decisions that are seen as political, as they are free to act according to their values

(Nystuen, Strømme & Hellestveit). Political acts are legitimate in cases of grave violations of human rights if the fundamental framework for academic activities, researchers' individual academic freedom, is not violated.

Second, and probably the most prominent argument against institutional boycott, is that it will affect not only university-agreements, but also individual research collaboration funded by other means than the university's own. Such collaboration, too, demands agreements signed at institutional level. Thus, individual researchers' free choice of research topics and partners is violated.

A common counterargument is that restricting access to funding is not a violation of academic freedom, as such restrictions are commonplace within academia, for a host of reasons (Grønmo, *Khrono* 180424). Several European universities, e.g. Utrecht, Amsterdam, Erasmus and Ghent, have concluded that this does not impinge upon academic freedom (Lie, *Khrono*, 090326).

Third, academic freedom demands equal treatment. If universities in one country, in this case Israel, are boycotted, what about other countries that also violates academic freedom, human rights and international law? The list of such countries seems to grow almost daily, including old friends.

What-about-ism has first raised the question of why it is justified to boycott Russia, but not Israel. It gives the impression that academia is biased and allows Israel much more than any other state; to violate both international law and academic freedom (e.g. Neuman, *Uniforum* 02052024) Second, it is argued that for the time being only one country is under investigation for genocide, Israel, which makes the what-about-question irrelevant but boycott imperative both for moral and legal reasons (e.g. Lie, 090326)

The list of arguments pro et con is long, but in my opinion the three examples show that in a complex international situation like ours, there is more than one answer to the question of boycott. The answer is not necessarily as straightforward as one would have wished and would have been in an ideal world. In pondering about the answer, it might do to ask, "whose academic freedom and whose human rights it is that we want to protect", as Hyslop, Vally and Hassim (2006) suggest.

‘woke’/identity-politics and no platforming: threats to academic freedom?

Let me now briefly turn to ‘woke’, aka identity politics, and no platforming, aka cancel culture, as threats to academic freedom.

No platforming in academia dates to the late 1970s, when the British Union of Students recommended it to be used against openly racist or fascist persons invited to speak at universities. Students are still in the forefront of no-platforming protest, commonly directed against inviting speakers conceived racist, fascist or anti-transgender.

Racism is at the root of the concept of woke, too, initially a warning to African Americans in the 1930s and 40s to be aware when entering states ruled by laws institutionalizing racism. It was taken up again by Black Lives Matter (est. 2013) and attained strong global support after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. In the wake of huge protests, with students as a driving force, many American universities committed themselves to racial diversity. At that time, however, the concept of woke was already co-opted by right-wing American radicals as a derogatory term for *all* issues of race, gender and social justice and today it is mainly used in that manner – albeit in Europe it might also include a more liberal opposition.

At American universities laws and regulations aiming at diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) have recently been ruled unlawful due to said discrimination of historical dominant groups. Universities have received instructions as to which topics can be financed, researched and taught. The current authoritarian rule, supported by loud rightwing groups, strongly restricts both institutional and individual academic freedom. Stephanie Balme, French political scientist and Director of the Centre for International Studies of Science at Science PO sees in this development a parallel to McCarthyism’s condemned use of academic freedom in the 1940s and 1950s as a pretext to legitimize surveillance and exclusion of unwanted academics and research (Balme 2025).

In Europe, the issue of ‘woke’ and no platforming quite often seems to be freedom of speech rather than academic freedom (e.g. Kjærulf, NOU 2022:2). That is the case e.g. in British American political scientist Pippa Norris’, book *Cancel culture: Myth or reality?* (Norris, 2021:19-22). She finds that European academics to the right more commonly than those to the left find that respect for free speech in academia shows a downward trend.

The Committee for Academic Freedom in Britain seems to confirm that conclusion. Its work is firmly based on opposition against DEI-measures in the academy ([Our Mission - Committee For Academic Freedom](#)) and the committee has published a long list of examples of “cancel culture”, targeting mainly academics promoting ideas interpreted as racist or homo- or trans-phobic. A recent French report concludes differently; that much noise has been made over a limited number of no-platforming efforts that have done little to restrict academic freedom (see Balme 2025). The academic divide in opinions is thus equally sharp as that regarding boycotts, and it follows a similar political division.

Arguments in favor of no platforming range from epistemic via moral to legal arguments. Some argue that no platforming totally acceptable if it «support a university culture that maintains rigorous disciplinary standards, by denying attention and credibility to speakers who fall short of those standards” (Lackey (ed) 2018: 186-210). Others find that no platforming contradicts the academic value of knowledge and understanding being attained through the confrontation of opposing arguments.

A less used argument, at least I suppose it is, not only in Norway, is that no platforming by students –the most common agent – is wrong because, and I quote the author Gideon Elford, lecturer in philosophy at Oxford «under the principles of academic freedom, the students shall not be included in the constituency with the right to constrain the platforming of others» (Elford 2023).

I have commented upon the academic freedom-issues most passionately discussed in recent years. Less passionately discussed, but by many within the academia held to be much more important, not to say the most important –is the more hidden and indirect pressure from public authorities, research foundations, institutional leadership and other agents controlling strategic resources or being in a position to threaten with libel suits or other punitive actions (c.f. Thue et.al. 2022: 99). Sometimes the pressure is also quite open, as it has been in Norway re. salmon farming and other issues dealing with protection of nature and climate (e.g. Elvbakken and Finstad 2023). Violations also of institutional autonomy increasingly occur in traditionally democratic countries; clearly demonstrated in the yearly reports from Scholars at Risk’s monitoring project (e.g. SAR, 2025). We might expect such threats to increase due to an increasing level of global conflict and an increasing pressure against democratic

institutions and international law. As we speak, war is impacting the production of knowledge both in social sciences, the humanities and science and technology – the latter being directly used in the service of authoritarian regimes that as a rule are hostile to knowledge not serving their own interests. To protect and promote academic freedom under these circumstances demands more than boycott-debates or identity-politics have ever done – and the IUC seminar series offers a welcome opportunity to discuss what to defend by which means. Defending democracy and opposing totalitarianism are certainly involved.

Thank you for your attention!

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