



# Academic freedom for critical geography: principles, threats, resistance

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**Abstract.** Attacks on academic freedom target mainly critical scholarship: academics who challenge, criticize and debate power relations and inequality lack confidence, not only in authoritarian countries but also in democracies such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Critical research in the fields of climate change, postcolonial studies and gender equality is increasingly under fire in public debates. These are the scientific fields in which many geographers do research and teach. With the authoritarian turnaround in many countries, neoliberal trends in research funding and the rising influence of online media activists on political decisions, attacks on researchers and research areas have taken on a new quality. In order to fight for academic freedom, it is important to understand the principles of and threats against freedom of expression, freedom of speech, university autonomy and academic freedom clearly. Restrictions of these freedoms have different consequences in the areas of teaching, university self-administration, research acknowledgement and the acquisition of third-party funding. This paper highlights the challenges and proposes measures to safeguard academic freedom for critical geography.

## 1 Introduction

With my intervention, I would like to shed light on the impact of right-wing attacks on critical science in combination with neoliberal dynamics at universities in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Based on observations in different research fields in human geography, this intervention suggests necessary action by scientists, universities and science associations. In general, academic freedom is restricted if negative consequences for the development of teaching and research activities (including publishing, lecturing and applying for funding) are threatened or feared based on the experiences of others. The perceived freedom of science depends heavily on whether researchers fear that their own research is under threat.

A distinction must be made between a legal understanding of academic freedom and the practice of academic freedom in higher-education policy. Unlike in many other social spaces, the communication of scientific findings is protected by law – in Germany, even in the constitution. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany defines academic freedom as follows: “Art and science, research and teaching are free” (GG 5(3)). It is a right to freedom of communi-

cation that is particularly worthy of protection as long as it remains loyal to the constitution. The constitutional right protects anyone who wants to achieve knowledge using scientific methods. This idea of academic freedom has been a globalized norm of a liberal science since the 1960s (Börzel and Spannagel, 2024:22). However, a university is not just a space of legal regulations. Universities are social spaces in which the limits of what can be said are explored.

I argue that all academics must engage in the preservation of academic freedom. In the following, I outline the principles of academic freedom, discuss current restrictions and threats, highlight current forms of resistance, and finally propose measures for a critical geography.

## 2 Principles

Experienced restrictions on academic freedom of speech are not limited to individual cases but rather are systematic in our times. We are experiencing an authoritarian turn, which represents a ferocious attack on the imaginaries of political emancipation, social equality and international solidarity. Right-wing parties, which, today, have many members

in federal and state parliaments, such as the Alternative for Germany party (AfD), Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP) or the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), are succeeding in re-defining academic freedom and combating critical science in alliance with wide-range, reactionary media (e.g. Nius, Bild). They contrast the principle of academic freedom with the principle of freedom of expression for reactionary positions and the principle of freedom of ideology to prevent critical (“woke”) positions. The political function of academic freedom is not to exchange opinions but to preserve truth claims that are beyond the scope of political negotiation. “Free speech makes no distinction about quality, academic freedom does” (Scott, 2019:118). When an evolutionary biologist comments on gender studies, it is an opinion rather than science. Academic freedom requires participation in academic discourse based on a sufficient understanding of the subject matter and its methods. This strategy has been effective because it has drawn upon common sense, political ideas and social sensibilities developed during the decades of neoliberalism, such as meritocratic values of competition, punitive sentiments and the weakening of bonds of solidarity (Farvardin and Robles, 2025), as I will show in the section on resistances.

Geographers have rarely been in the spotlight until now, but topics that deal with multiple crises and transformation demands related to climate change, migration politics or genocides are increasingly becoming the centre of attacks and restrictions. My intervention attempts to explore the distinction between academic freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of speech and to identify those responsible for defending academic freedom in a more differentiated way. My observation is based on teaching at numerous German and Austrian universities, on researching in international networks, on memberships in scientific associations and on being a professor in geography.<sup>1</sup> Scientists who do not have access to a permanent university position and are teaching in a more precarious position would maybe emphasize other perspectives of academic freedom and possible acts of resistance related to their academic status, their legal status as employees and their financial backing.

So-called “freedom of ideology” or “ideological neutrality” is often used synonymously with “academic freedom” in political debates. There is no requirement for political neutrality at universities. The only requirement is neutrality with regard to political parties, provided those parties do not seek to abolish fundamental democratic values. Rather, academics are called upon to defend democratic values and, where necessary, to be politically active in doing so. By attributing an

ideological approach to certain areas of research (e.g. gender studies), other areas of research (e.g. research on economic growth or nuclear power) are normalized to be neutral science.

How can fake science (climate change denial, etc.) be countered at universities without compromising the principle of academic freedom? To provide a safe space for critical science, every university should proactively develop measures to ensure freedom of speech and research. The President’s Office, the legal department and the communications department of each university must work together with their scholars to develop a strategy for dealing with attacks on academic freedom. Furthermore, this task cannot be delegated to a diversity manager. The university as a social institution has to defend the academic freedom of its scientific staff, stand up for their autonomy and provide legal assistance if its employees are publicly defamed in the course of their scientific work. It must ensure that its scientists remain able to communicate if their email accounts are flooded with hate messages. Additionally, it must offer support if the private lives of its scientists and their families are attacked – in person or online – in this context. Scientists have the task of bringing their expertise and findings to the public and expressing themselves outside of their scientific communities. Universities must safeguard this task and have to define and establish procedures with clearly defined information flows and action steps and involve their scholars in all steps.

### 3 Threats

I am convinced that researching and teaching uncomfortable truths such as those regarding climate change, sexism and racism also require uncomfortable scientists. This was already the case in the past, but with the authoritarian turnaround in many countries and social media as a central source of information, it has taken on a new relevance. An academic discipline like geography that wants to understand the causes of unsustainability and to recognize the conditions for system transformation must enable critical positions and an inclusive scientific environment. If climate crisis, coloniality, gender and intersectionality, and other core topics in human geography are under threat, it becomes most obvious that knowledge production is contested and that academic freedom in general is under threat.

A study by the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies on subjectively perceived academic freedom at German universities and research institutes from 2024 shows the expectations and fears regarding the choice of research topics, the implementation of research projects and the publication of research results. A majority of interviewees (9083 respondents from a random sample of all status groups at 158 universities) consider themselves to be free in the three aspects examined: 83 % in the choice of research topics, 64 % in research projects and 80 % in publi-

<sup>1</sup>My academic work is always related to causes of structural inequalities in various fields of transformation, like climate adaptation and mitigation, renewable energy, urban sustainability, and platform economy. As a feminist geographer and active member of decolonial networks, I have experienced attacks on academic freedom within the university and by right-wing media.

cations (Fabian et al., 2024:10). This means that every fifth scientist feels that their research practice is rather unfree. A total of 8 % expect moral devaluation, and 10 % expect career problems – with minor distinctions between the status groups (Fabian et al., 2024:11).

Critical research in the fields of gender justice and of climate crises, care crises, energy transformation or coloniality (my main topics for decades and key themes of integrative geography in general) is increasingly under fire in public debates and third-party funding. Policing academia by attacking academic freedom and threatening to abolish certain research priorities is not a new trend. Scholars of critical theory have experienced marginalization for decades; scholars of Marxist theory still hold niches at universities and institutes founded in the 1970s; although feminist academics have taken on professorships in some disciplines, they remain isolated. What is new is that policing, e.g. against feminist scholars, no longer takes place through mockery by colleagues – as was common in geography until the 1980s (Binder, 1990) – but in the form of attacks against specific scholars by authoritarian groups, journalists or politicians being published via press or social media. Affected scientists and their academic institutions must therefore develop new strategies to respond to these attacks. The presence of authoritarian politics is rapidly growing. In some countries – like the USA and Hungary – the proponents are taking aggressive and radical action against some research topics and threaten to spread this strategy to other countries – like Austria or Germany. The elimination of gender studies at Hungarian universities also creates pressure for feminist geography scholars in other countries. Attacks against academic freedom are not limited to internet trolling against individual scientists. In public media and more and more frequently in statements by politicians, scientists are being named and shamed for conducting ideologically motivated research.

Every year in March, the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) is published as a report on the state in 179 countries. The index is a collaborative project between Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg (FAU) and the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Five indicators are examined: freedom of research and teaching, freedom of academic exchange and scientific communication, academic and cultural freedom of expression, institutional autonomy of universities, and campus integrity. In 2025, 2363 country experts were interviewed regarding these aspects of academic freedom. Although academic freedom is still much better protected in democracies than in autocracies, the Academic Freedom Index 2026 shows that academic freedom can also come under pressure in democracies. A long-term view of the data shows that academic freedom is at risk when parties hostile to pluralism come to power. Countries with a significant loss of academic freedom include the USA, Argentina and Mexico. A cause for concern is the erosion of university autonomy in liberal democracies, such as

Canada; the Netherlands; Switzerland; and, most abruptly, the USA (FAU and V-Dem, 2026).

If scientists experience politically motivated attacks in public debate, from politicians or via social media, they should be defended by their peer scholars and protected by their universities, as well as by their professional associations. This is usually not the case. Politically motivated attacks against so called wokeness – like solidarity with deprived groups – are not attacks against specific people but against critical positions. Targeted campaigns of defamation against scientists have a negative impact on critical research in general. The strategy is to attack single academics, but all scientists whose research topics represent a potential target are affected by these attacks. All critical scholars must be aware of threats and carefully calculate how and in what context their research is visible to the public or whether they strategically position specific topics. These instruments of control and repression are aimed at forcing unwanted voices to self-censor. These attacks are intended to intimidate critical scientists, absorb a lot of their working time and resources, and can have adverse health consequences. Even if the national consequences for scientists are different – in Germany, for example, professors are not employed by the presidency of their university but by the state ministry and cannot be fired easily – gender, colonialism and climate studies are fundamentally under pressure, and scientists have to legitimize and defend the relevance of their research topic.

In Germany, the debate about academic freedom is characterized by public controversies about guest lectures on gender identity or antisemitism. At some leading universities, such as Goethe-Universität Frankfurt and Humboldt University zu Berlin, events have been cancelled in recent years due to student protests against discriminatory content with a lack of scientific evidence (e.g. denial of transgenderism and intersexuality or biologicistic racism). This procedure is called “cancel culture” by right-wing media and creates a great deal of attention for the actors turned into victims and their positions. Self-proclaimed victims of cancel culture intentionally mix up the principle of academic freedom and freedom of expression and demand recognition of “alternative opinions”, even if these have no scientific but, often, only anecdotal evidence (Daub, 2024). In 2022, scientists founded the German “Academic Freedom Network” with the aim of defending freedom of speech against a supposed cancel culture. However, disruptive actions by students to prevent racist or sexist lectures cannot be seen as a fundamental restriction of academic freedom as the academics concerned can continue to teach and conduct research.

A profound threat to academic freedom, however, comes from conservative and right-wing politicians who accuse representatives of postcolonial studies of having a fundamentally anti-Semitic mindset (Ziai, 2025). The resolutions – introduced by the governing parties (SPD, CDU) and the Greens and the Liberals – of the German Bundestag of 17 May 2019, “Resolutely countering the BDS movement –

combating antisemitism” (BDS-Bewegung entschlossen entgegenzutreten – Antisemitismus bekämpfen), and of 29 January 2025, “Countering antisemitism and hostility towards Israel in schools and universities and securing free discourse space” (Antisemitismus und Israelfeindlichkeit an Schulen und Hochschulen entschlossen entgegenzutreten sowie den freien Diskursraum sichern), subject academics who conduct research on issues of land grabbing, settler colonialism or genocide to general suspicion. Both resolutions violate academic freedom and university autonomy by enabling the dismissal of academic staff who speak out on the genocide in Gaza and legitimize the banning of conferences that deal with multi-directional memory, for example, with reference to a very broad understanding of anti-Semitism. The aim of countering anti-Semitic discrimination and violence at universities is important and appropriate, but the resolutions adopted with reference to the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition of anti-Semitism – which was not formulated for use at universities – do not differentiate between critical statements. They equalize the description of settlement colonialism and apartheid with the denial of Jewish people’s right to self-determination. A post on social media criticizing the Israeli government can result in repressive consequences and the end of an academic career.

#### 4 Resistance

It is not only the policing of the academy by authoritarian forces that has a new quality but also the institutional responses to it. With my intervention, I would like to shed light on the impact of neoliberal dynamics in universities and the influence of a research and education policy obsessed with competition and selection of the best according to usability criteria.

Increasing competition for research funding and awards for excellence make universities more susceptible to the ideology of “neutral” science, anticipatory obedience and mechanisms of exclusion. Large research collaborations in particular, which must be successful in the competition for funding in order to be able to conduct research with adequate resources, avoid system-critical perspectives. Instead of developing clusters of excellence on causes of climate catastrophe, social impacts of multiple crises and postcolonial extractivism with suspected ideology, seemingly neutral perspectives and concepts are being pursued. At the party’s national conference in January 2025, the AfD party leader announced that, should the party come to power, she would abolish gender studies and dismiss all professors who teach the subject.

If a university’s management is focused more on its public image and the battle for national and international attention and not on the conditions of academic freedom, even small groups have an easy time with political campaigns against individual university members. In many cases in recent years, university administrations have capitulated rashly and have

not stood up for their scholars (Täuber, 2026). Scientists need a reliable support structure from their universities and scientific associations. Mission statements or general commitments to academic freedom are not sufficient for this. Different views regarding the meaning, scope and emphasis of academic freedom made universities norm takers rather than norm shapers. Networks of academics and higher-education institutions are only beginning to identify the practical consequences of the increasing threats to their academic freedom since the turn of the millennium (Börzel and Spannagel, 2024:1).

The protection of academic freedom must also be enforced by academic associations. The German Association of Geography published a statement on the restriction of academic freedom and expressed its concern about events such as those in the USA or Hungary but stumbled into the discourse trap of “ideological freedom”: “This makes it all the more important to oppose these developments and defend academic freedom, diversity and ideology-free research and its institutions” (VGdH, 2025, translation by author). Is it even possible to combine diversity and freedom of ideology – in the authoritarian sense – without losing diversity?

#### 5 Conclusion

The institutional, political, social and economic conditions that enable critical research and teaching – including in geography – must be defended in order to ensure that academia remains relevant. Academic knowledge production should accept the provisional nature of knowledge, its openness to criticism and revision, and the methodological standards of a discipline without having to follow the disciplinary mainstream.

There is a right to dissent in democratic societies, at universities and in geography – including arguments and analyses critical of the state. In both authoritarian and democratic countries, academic freedom is under threat from practices of scandalization, intimidation and repression, orchestrated in coordinated campaigns by conservative media, social media activists and far-right parties, as well as by university management and political decision-makers who are unable to withstand this pressure and pass it on by sanctioning academics.

These issues require not only solidarity with colleagues under pressure but also a collective practice within geography and all other disciplines, as well as within universities and research departments, constantly demanding the conditions necessary for academic freedom. This includes the following: (a) not responding to inquiries from political parties regarding the activities of academics; (b) developing guidelines for dealing with “hate speech” from influencers, media activists and politicians; (c) engaging in cross-university debates on how to deal with research assignments from right-wing actors; (d) proactively developing strategies for

how colleagues and supervisors should deal with researchers whose political statements on social media accounts have been spied on and scandalized; and (e) organizing discipline-specific task forces to be able to respond quickly to attacks against research projects with statements. These strategies are currently being developed in the field of geography and at most universities. Until now, scientists have mostly relied on self-help and have built interdisciplinary networks to exchange information and experiences and to defend academic freedom in public, such as “Alliance for Critical Scholarship in Solidarity”, “International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies”, and the geographers collective Orantotango. In January 2026, geographers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland first started a network to address issues relating to academic freedom. The Geography Network has not yet been formally established. A report has been published in the Bulletin of the Association for Geography (VGdH) (Bauriedl and Werner, 2026), and further formats for exchange are planned. Major research institutions in Germany have published guidelines on how to deal with authoritarian attacks (DFG and HRK, 2025; Lewandowsky et al., 2025; GERDEA Forschungsverbund, 2025). Safeguarding academic freedom requires significant effort from all academics, and this effort is essential for critical scholarship as much as for critical geography.

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