

## Current Threats to Academic Freedom in Authoritarian, Illiberal, and Liberal Regimes

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### Abstract

In the context of increasing threats and attacks on academic freedom, this essay provides an overview of the various forms that they take in different types of regimes. A first section discusses conceptions and foundations of academic freedom from sociological (in relation to field theory), legal, and historical perspectives. The second section describes the forms of violation that academic freedom faces in authoritarian and illiberal regimes: from intimidation to the prosecution of scholars, from ideological control of institutions to their banning, and from disqualification of certain currents or topics to censorship (for instance, gender studies). As shown through concrete cases, these attacks have a significant impact on the academic field in liberal regimes, via exiles, cooperation agreements, or ideological pressure. The final section analyzes the threats that academic freedom encounters in liberal regimes, which stem from both exogenous (pressure from illiberal countries) and endogenous factors (neoliberal and antiterrorist policies, as well as private interests).

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The academic field has gained its autonomy from the political, economic, and religious fields by asserting the principle of academic freedom. However, the increasing attacks on academic freedom everywhere, including in liberal democracies, raise the need to better understand its foundations and fragilities. The task of the present essay is to identify the forms that these attacks take in different types of regimes. To achieve such a mapping, I shall first briefly evoke the definition and foundations of academic freedom,<sup>1</sup> then provide an overview of the restrictions and attacks it faces in authoritarian and illiberal regimes, and conclude with a brief discussion of liberal regimes.

Political science typically contrasts authoritarian regimes, where power is highly concentrated and coercive, and there is no freedom of speech, to liberal democracies, where the citizens enjoy civil and political rights and individual freedom. However, the notion of illiberalism, albeit criticized, has proven increasingly useful in describing authoritarian trends in regimes that present themselves formally as electoral democracies, all the while restricting individual liberties and rights, including freedom of expression. Academic freedom is a relevant indicator for observing such authoritarian trends in so-called illiberal regimes.

Notwithstanding the clear-cut differences between, on one side, authoritarian and illiberal regimes, where academic freedom is systematically violated if at all recognized, and on the other, liberal regimes where it is in principle protected, I will argue that academic freedom is also increasingly threatened in the latter because of exogenous and endogenous factors altogether. Exogenous factors include the external pressure from the authoritarian and illiberal regimes, either on exile researchers (or through them) or regarding certain topics such as genocide or critique of their regimes. Endogenous factors are primarily related to neoliberal policies and market pressure, as well as restrictions on freedom of speech stemming from anti-terrorism laws or policies, which can serve as a Trojan horse for illiberal tendencies.

## 1 Academic Freedom and Its Foundations: Sociological, Legal, and Historical Perspectives

From a sociological standpoint, academic freedom can be defined as one of the principles on which the academic field's autonomy relies: the principle of research for research's sake — as art for art's sake — has freedom of research and intellectual freedom as its condition. Field autonomy, in Bourdieu's sense, means autonomy from external (political, religious, economic) powers (Bourdieu, 1993 & 2022). As I have argued elsewhere, field autonomy cannot be equated with professional autonomy, which is granted by powers to execute certain tasks that can be heteronomous, such as producing war machines (Sapiro, 2019). Fields of cultural production in general, and the academic field in particular, are divided by the opposition between autonomous and heteronomous forces, and academic freedom — like art for art's sake — can be mobilized by these two poles in their struggles over the power relation in the field (as illustrated, in the present issue, in the article by Baudot, 2025). However, academic freedom is also related to professional autonomy, as it is to institutional autonomy, and the ways these three dimensions are intertwined would require further investigations that go beyond the scope of this paper. Let's just say for the time being that one of the ways that they are intertwined is the configuration of modern universities combining teaching and research (the Humboldt model), which connected by the end of the 19th century the field of higher education with the emerging scientific fields, organized around journals and learned societies. The authority and symbolic

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1. For a more in-depth analysis, see Fassin's article (2025) in this issue.

power universities have gained as institutions enabled them to negotiate collective autonomy for the academic field, which, as defined by Bourdieu (1988), includes universities and research institutions — although not all of the latter have achieved the same institutional autonomy as universities, depending on their funding scheme and dependency upon the state or private corporations. This collective autonomy implies individual autonomy based on interdependency.

Academic freedom traditionally encompasses freedom of research, freedom of teaching, and freedom of expression for professors and students, both within academia and in the public space. This freedom has been asserted in the face of religious and political authorities. From the legal standpoint, it is, however, necessary to remind ourselves that academic freedom is distinct from freedom of expression: while freedom of expression is an established human right, academic freedom is a freedom specifically attached to the university. For this reason, it is sometimes criticized and attacked as a privilege rather than a right.

Nevertheless, it is a historical fact that academic freedom has come to be regarded not as a privilege but as a freedom necessary for the common good. Academic freedom promotes the development of science and knowledge, which in turn benefits society as a whole — a benefit enshrined as a human right in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 27): “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”. While the United Nations’ 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights includes, as part of the right to freedom of expression, the “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds” (art. 19.3), its International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted at the same time, binds the State Parties to the Covenant to “respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity” (art. 15.3).

Even as a specific right recognized in liberal democracies, academic freedom is however often put in balance with other rights, such as medical secret, protection of private life, or, on the contrary, freedom of expression: for example, when students or faculty oppose the holding of extreme right-wing or Islamophobic talks in the university; but academic freedom does not mean that one can say whatever they like from the pulpit of a university... (see, in this issue, Fassin, 2025).

Recognition of academic freedom stems from several different traditions. In Germany, it can be traced back to the concept of “Einheitsuniversität” asserted by Humboldt University, which combines teaching and research. Freedom of science and its teaching was guaranteed by the Prussian Constitution of 1850 (art. 20). Abolished by the Nazi regime, academic freedom was re-established in West Germany in 1949. “Freedom of science” (*Wissenschaftsfreiheit*) is guaranteed by article 5.3 of the German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*): “*Kunst und Wissenschaft, Forschung und Lehre sind frei. Die Freiheit der Lehre entbindet nicht von der Treue zur Verfassung*”. (“Art and science, research and teaching are free. The freedom of teaching does not exempt one from loyalty to the Constitution”).

In the United States, a first statement of principle on academic freedom was published in 1915 at the instigation of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure of the American Association of University Professors, a principle confirmed in 1925 by the American Council on Education and reformulated in 1940 by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP): “The common good depends upon the free pursuit of truth and its free exposition”.

“Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and

of the student to freedom in learning. It carries with it duties correlative with rights”.<sup>2</sup>

In France, like in Italy, there is a long history of university franchises dating back to Middle Ages and codified in the notion of *libertas scolastica*, which protected it from the secular power (Destemberg, 2015). In 1231, following a two-year strike that had been preceded by a violent repression of student protests, the clerks of the University of Paris obtained from the Pope that the police would not be allowed to access the campuses without the authorization of the University authorities. Academic freedom was reaffirmed by the Faure Law of 1968 and reiterated by the Savary Law of 1984, and while it is not codified in the Constitution, it is recognized by the Constitutional Council as a fundamental principle of the Republic. By virtue of this principle, academics benefit from a derogation with regard to the status of civil servants, based on a recognition of their institutional and individual autonomy, including self-organization, peer assessment, recruitment by cooptation, freedom of teaching and researching. They can also derogate from the duty of reserve and express themselves freely — including critically — not only within academia but also in the public sphere.

Beyond the circulation of the Humboldtian model of the university, which combines teaching and research, the principle of academic freedom has been internationalized since 1966 through UNESCO, which reformulated it in 1997: academic freedom is guaranteed by the autonomy of teaching and research institutions.<sup>3</sup> However, institutional autonomy is not always sufficient to guarantee academic freedom, as we shall see (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015).

The individualized character of academic freedom is enshrined in law in several jurisdictions. In some others, however, academic freedom is considered not as an individual right, but as a right protecting a certain social function that can only be exercised freely. As such, it is protected not only against the state but also against any attempt to use the academic world for purposes unrelated to scientific research, whether political, economic, or religious. It is therefore accompanied by institutional conditions guaranteeing academic freedom, such as the freedom to disseminate research and the protection of the academic environment.

In several countries, such as Germany, Switzerland (article 20 of the 1999 Federal Constitution), or Brazil, freedom of science is protected by the Constitution. This is also the case in the 1996 South African Constitution, which guarantees academic freedom and freedom of scientific research as a form of freedom of expression, and in the 1987 Philippine Constitution (art. XIV, Section 5.2), as well as in this country’s jurisprudence, which has defined it in four dimensions: autonomy to hire faculty members and staff according to academic standards; autonomy of teaching whatever subjects of topics they wish; autonomy in the teaching method; autonomy in deciding on admissions. Furthermore, the Philippine Bill of Rights stipulates, as part of the principle of freedom of expression (art. III, section 4), that “the right of professors and students to express their thoughts and opinions, both within the academic community and in public, is integral to academic freedom. It allows for intellectual discourse, debate, and dissent. Faculty and students also have the right to form associations, including unions and academic societies, which are regarded as a ‘vital aspect of academic freedom’.”<sup>4</sup>

A comparative study of academic freedom in various countries would require examining

2. AAUP, “1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments”. <https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/aaup-policies-reports/policy-statements/1940-statement-principles-academic>.
3. <https://www.unesco.org/fr/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-status-higher-education-teaching-personnel>.
4. <https://www.respicio.ph/bar/2025/political-law-and-public-international-law/education-science-technology-arts-culture-and-sports/academic-freedom>.

its local traditions, the implementation of international directives from the UN and bodies like UNESCO since the afterwar period, its signification — especially in relation to freedom of expression, institutional autonomy — and legal status, and the related practices (on academic freedom as a practice, see, in this issue, the article by Gil Eyal, 2025). It would also require studying the specific modalities of violating this principle and the forms of threats it faces in these countries. I will outline here some common attacks or threats that can be found in most countries within the same category, although with varying intensities. The variations could be interpreted in terms of the degree of (il)liberalism, as well as in light of the discipline and local history, and sensitive topics. An Academic Freedom Index proposes such a comparison for 179 countries and territories, based on a set of indicators.<sup>5</sup> However, beyond the discussion of the indicators, a qualitative approach is needed.

## 2 Attacks on Academic Freedom in Authoritarian and Illiberal Regimes

In authoritarian regimes such as China — where the political socialization of the students under the ideological umbrella of the Communist party is an explicit mission assigned to universities (Veg, 2024) —, Iran (Ladier-Fouladi, 2024), Afghanistan and Syria under the Assad government, but also in illiberal countries such as Turkey, Russia, India, Egypt or Hungary, academic freedom is indeed restricted by political or religious authorities, or by both, leading to self-censorship for those who disagree with the dominant ideology. Academics who dare address taboo or suspect topics are dismissed, publicly harassed, prosecuted and sometimes imprisoned — including scholars working in other countries, such as French-Iranian anthropologist Fariba Adelkhah, who is affiliated with a research center at Science Po in Paris, and who spent three years in an Iranian prison, or French PhD student Victor Dupont, who was arrested in Tunisia and imprisoned for one month. Many are forced into exile,<sup>6</sup> some are hosted in programs such as Scholars at Risk, an international network based in the US, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative of the Humboldt Stiftung in Germany, Academy in exile at Dortmund, and PAUSE in France, which has hosted 585 fellows from 43 countries from the year of its establishment in 2017 to 2023.<sup>7</sup> From 2015 to 2024, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative hosted 491 Fellows from 26 countries of origin at 128 host institutions: 41.9% from Turkey; 22.7% from Ukraine; 14.0% from Syria; 21.4% from 23 others (including Afghanistan, Belarus, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Cameroon, Myanmar, Russia, Venezuela).

In the illiberal countries, like Russia or Turkey, scholars who express themselves or take stands on topics that are taboo or dare criticize the government are accused of terrorism or of undermining state security. The Turkish government has prosecuted as an act of terrorist propaganda many of the signatories of the 2016 petition “We will not be complicit in this crime”, against the attacks that targeted the PKK and left 200 dead at the end of 2015. Some were imprisoned, others were dismissed and condemned to exile, professional conversion, or continuation of research in associative structures, mainly the solidarity academies formed within the country but outside university walls (see, in this issue, Can & Kaya, 2025). The solidarity academies lack access to online resources; some receive funding from the European Union, but

5. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>.

6. On contemporary trajectories of intellectual exiles, see Cohen (2025). For an overview of the literature on past exile intellectuals, see Cohen & Schult (2024).

7. <https://www.programmepause.fr/rapports-dactivite/>. I am a member of its committee. On the history of these programs, see Dakhli et al. (2024).

the dismissed scholars had to reorient their research (Mestci, 2023). Those who were able to keep their position in the university continue to work there with restricted freedom (Can & Kaya, 2025). These conditions impact research topics and access to sources.

Academics who become exiles remain exposed to threats. An extreme example is Turkish sociologist Pinar Selek, who has been prosecuted by the Turkish justice system for 25 years for “terrorism”, a proven false accusation.<sup>8</sup> In 1998, she was arrested and tortured for refusing to reveal the names of her Kurdish interviewees to the authorities, in accordance with professional ethics, which can be compared to medical secrecy, and which should be codified. Released after two years’ imprisonment, she undertook an investigation into the masculinist foundations of a nationalist, militarist, and patriarchal political system, and the mechanisms of threat by which adherence to this social and political order is obtained. She has become one of the system’s prime targets precisely because she revealed how it works. Thus 25 years, Pinar Selek has been persecuted by the Turkish government for practicing her profession as a sociologist (Cohen & Sapiro, 2025).

This extreme case risks becoming commonplace. This raises the question of the means of action available to these exiled colleagues, who are exposed to threats and intimidation. Pinar Selek is currently a researcher attached to a laboratory in a French university, but the threats continue. She finally obtained functional protection from her university (although she is not a civil servant, but as a university employee she can obtain it if she is threatened in her academic activity). However, the university itself is now being targeted by the Turkish regime: in June 2024, at the fifth hearings of her trial — which keeps being postponed —, the French university where Pinar Selek works was implicated by the Turkish Interior Ministry, which pretended to establish a link between an academic conference organized under the auspices of the university and “terrorist” activities, in a clear attempt to discredit both Pinar Selek and academic freedom as a whole. It is a development that compounds the threats to academic freedom posed by illiberal regimes to teaching and research in liberal regimes.

For each new hearing, a French delegation travels to Turkey with her lawyers, made up of members of her support committee, and representatives of professional associations, the Association Française de Sociologie, the Association Française de Science Politique, and the Observatoire des Atteintes aux Libertés Académiques (OALA), founded by political scientists and sociologists two years ago.<sup>9</sup> Three new hearings took place in 2025, in a political climate that has hardened, leading the Turkish government to replace the previous judges with ones even more subservient to political power.

Another quite extreme case concerned a young researcher, Yauheni Kryzhanouski, originally from Belarus and working in France, where he defended a thesis entitled *Contester par la musique sous régime autoritaire: La politisation du rock au Bélarus* and published it in 2022. He was sentenced in July 2024 to 10 years in prison (strict regime penal colony) following a trial *in absentia* under the “special procedure” for serious and very serious crimes (applied to prosecute political opponents and dissidents abroad). Along with 19 other researchers, journalists, and activists, he was declared guilty of complicity in “incitement to social hatred”, participation in a conspiracy to seize power, complicity in calls to seize power, and other actions aimed at undermining national security, as well as participation in a group with a view to committing extremist acts. The Board of Directors of Science Po Strasbourg voted a motion of support,

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8. The attack on the Istanbul spice market attributed to her was due to the accidental explosion of a gas cylinder, but the owner of the firm liable for the accident is a friend of Erdogan.

9. And of which I am a member.

which was followed by other collective actions.

Alongside these extreme cases of accusations of terrorism or terrorist propaganda, and of undermining state security (which are also common in Russia), there are other “methods”, such as disciplinary procedures (also practiced in Turkey), open threats and the less explicit intimidations practiced in Russia, India or Egypt (where professors have also been dismissed), like in Iran. These intimidations may also concern institutions of higher education abroad. For instance, a Russian PhD student was denounced in a far-right Russian media as affiliated with an “anti-Russian” research center in France.

The closure of institutions or departments based on accusations of foreign funding and/or influence is another common measure that undermines academic freedom. The Hungarian government ousted Central European University on the basis of a law passed in 2017 on foreign campuses, and CEU had to go into exile in Vienna (with a branch in Berlin). In Russia, many institutes were shut down, such as the Centre for Contemporary Philosophy and Social Sciences at the Philosophy Department at Moscow State University in 2017.

The severe restriction of academic freedom is also observed in the prohibition imposed on researchers to study historical facts such as the Armenian genocide in Turkey, where any mention of this genocide has been criminalized in 2004 by article 306 of the Penal Code as harmful to its national interest. By the same token, in Poland, under the former conservative Polish government led by the PIS (the party “Law and Justice”), researchers working on the implication of Poles in the Holocaust were targeted (Forecki, 2023). This campaign followed the polemics sparked by Jan Tomasz Gross’s book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (2001), which revealed the involvement of Polish villagers in the massacre of Jews in Jedwabne in 1941. To combat research deemed defamatory and damaging to Poland’s reputation, the Polish government dismissed a number of historians and attempted to introduce, in 2018, an amendment to the law on the Institute for National Memory providing for criminal prosecution of individuals who would attribute to Poles a share of responsibility for Nazi crimes, “in contradiction with the facts”, and this article was only removed following international mobilization against this revisionist measure. Despite the deletion of this paragraph, Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking’s book (2022[2018]) on the fate of the Jews in occupied Poland, was sued in 2018, because of an error about a person, which had been confused with his namesake, by a relative of this person. This relative had been encouraged to file the lawsuit by the Polish Anti-Defamation League, funded by the conservative government.

In the academic world, tensions had already arisen in May 2016 during the conference “History Before Memory 2: Documentary Practices in the Early Historiographies of the Holocaust”, co-organized by the IKP (Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw) and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), as part of a partnership. The scheduled lecture by Jan Tomasz Gross could not take place at the IKP, nor at the German Historical Institute, due to external pressure, and had to be relocated to a venue offered by the journal *Krytyka Polityczna*, where the incident led to confrontation and scandal.<sup>10</sup>

This episode illustrates how such pressures affect joint initiatives, i.e., their transnationalization. While this first incident unfolded on Polish soil, a second one shows that those exerting such pressures and intimidation no longer hesitate to intervene beyond national borders, including in liberal democracies. This was the case during a conference on “The New Polish School of Holocaust History”, held at the EHESS in Paris on February 21–22, 2019. Opened by Jan Tomasz Gross’s keynote lecture at the Collège de France, the conference aimed to present

10. Oral testimony of Judith Lyon-Caen, one of the French organizers of the conference, to the author (October 5, 2025). Thanks to her for this.

a collective investigation conducted within the Polish Center for Holocaust Research at the Academy of Sciences, as well as a research carried out by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir on the Kielce pogrom of 1946. Prior to the event, the organizers were subjected to unspecified forms of intimidation, and the conference itself was disrupted by about thirty individuals in the audience, who shouted, interrupted, and uttered antisemitic insults (Lyon-Caen, 2019). Grouped around Father Stanisław Jeż, former rector of the Polish Catholic Mission in France, most of these individuals were linked to clubs established abroad by the right-wing newspaper *Gazeta Polska*. The President of the Institute for National Memory (IPN), having complained that historians from his institute had not been invited, was given the floor during the conference to express his point of view — and was applauded by the “patriots” who had come to disrupt the event.

Following this incident, the French Minister of Research wrote a letter to the Polish Minister to complain about this attack on freedom of research, to which the latter answered that in France this freedom was threatened by the “ideology of political correctness” and that he was well informed about antisemitism in France... (cited by Forecki, 2023). The public campaign denouncing Polish historians as traitors who tarnish the image of the Polish nation continued long after the conference in a pre-electoral conjuncture.

Some research topics, especially gender studies, which contradict their conception of a “natural” social order, are also censored in these authoritarian and illiberal regimes. In 2018, the illiberal Hungarian government withdrew the accreditation of gender studies programs on the alleged grounds that they were pursuing an ideology, and were not a discipline (Pető, 2021). Illustrating the circulation of this model, following the Hungarian example, the conservative camp in Turkey tried to implement a similar policy, with less success (Yelsalı Parmaksız, 2019). As Balázs Trencsényi (2021) puts it, “the attacks on institutions of higher education [...] fit into a transformative vision of society, one that seeks to break the supposed dominance of ‘liberal’, ‘cosmopolitan’, and ‘Westernized’ elites and build a new generation with ‘healthy national identity’”. This trend, which can also be observed in Turkey, is not new but has now managed to gain power and implement this conservative revolution (in Turkey, see Mestci, 2025).

Such a conservative revolution is currently underway in the United States. The shift from liberalism to illiberalism, evident since Trump’s new mandate, starting in 2025, is manifest in its aspiration to dramatically restrict academic freedom and freedom of expression in a country that has been a pioneer in illustrating these two principles. The Trump administration seeks to eliminate gender studies and critical race theory (to restore a conservative conception of the social order and naturalize social, gender and racial hierarchies), as well as studies on the climate crisis (to preserve corporate interests), but has been able so far to do so only at the federal level, namely through the banning of an increasing number of words such as abortion, diversity, gender, indigenous, inequality, race, racism, and so on, from all research programs funded by federal government agencies (Connelly, 2025; see also, in the present issue Eyal’s article, 2025).<sup>11</sup>

While they persecute academics in public institutions, some illiberal governments such as Turkey and India — or Brazil under Bolsonaro — support the growth of private universities in order to challenge the autonomy and symbolic power accumulated by professors in public universities. This support is typical of the combination of authoritarianism and capitalism: the control of speech once achieved by the state and the concentration of the press and publishing industries is now the product of the convergence of political and financial interests. In China,

11. See A.J. Connelly, Federal Government’s Growing Banned Words List Is Chilling Act of Censorship, October 1st, 2025. <https://pen.org/banned-words-list/>.



too, there is a convergent rise in the control of universities and their submission to the norms of knowledge commodification, accompanied by the control of public discourse through algorithms.

Economic censorship is a classical means of controlling speech and restricting academic freedom within universities, including the restriction or withdrawal of research funding for certain subjects and the cutting of funding for specific departments. This method is not specific to illiberal regimes; it directly affects increasingly liberal democracies.

### 3 Threats to Academic Freedom in Liberal Regimes

As we just saw, the liberal regimes cannot prevent external pressures stemming from illiberal or authoritarian governments on exile intellectuals or even on activities that address sensitive topics in these countries. However, there are also endogenous factors threatening academic freedom in these regimes. First, neoliberalism introduced austerity policies and new public management in public institutions, including the universities. In 2009, the British University and College Union expressed its concern at the threats to the “freedoms to research, teach, express and publish without interference or sanction” posed by the way research is funded and evaluated, the managerial approach of research governing bodies, and the pressure for researchers to find sponsors in the commercial world.<sup>12</sup> The old utilitarian argument against basic science has resurfaced, targeting the humanities in particular, which are accused of not meeting society’s needs. In Japan, in 2015, following a letter from the Minister of Education to the presidents of 86 universities, 26 humanities and social sciences faculties were threatened with closure or had their activities restricted under this pretext (Maillard, 2015).

Accused of being useless, the social sciences and humanities are also exposed to conservative attacks because of their critical tradition. In Australia and the USA (before Trump’s new election), right-wing critics of academic freedom used equivalent arguments to delegitimize entire disciplines and research programs for populist ends (on the American anti-intellectual tradition, see Huret, 2024). In Florida, two years before Trump’s re-election as President of the United States, gender studies as well as critical race theory were banned from major programs, while sociology was eliminated from the graduation programs of state Universities, after being accused of having been “hijacked by left-wing activists”. These decisions followed the appointment in January 2023 of six new board members by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. They also voted to eliminate the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office. These new members are right-wing activists in culture wars over education. They include Christopher Rufo, known as the architect of the anti-“critical race theory” movement, and Charles Kesler, a member of the Claremont Institute who contributed to setting up Trump’s 1776 Commission, which produced a report offering a conservative version of US national history, as a response to what is regarded as leftist history (Baker, 2024). Moreover, the University of New College library has been “purged” of books relating to gender studies, feminism, LGBT+, and diversity (as well as French classics! Walker, 2024).

The upsurge in defense of academic freedom in Germany, Canada and France in recent years has been directed primarily against the so-called “wokism” and “cancel culture” — or even “Islamism” in France (see, in this issue, the article by Baudot, 2025) —, and has served to discredit the university as a place of ideology rather than knowledge. In Quebec, an “Act

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12. UCU statement on academic freedom (2009). <https://www.ucu.org.uk/academicfreedom>.

respecting academic freedom in the university environment” was passed in 2022, following the controversy at the University of Ottawa over a professor’s use of the N-word.

The pro-Palestinian mobilization of students in spring 2024 and the violent attack against them at UCLA by persons who came from outside, led the university authorities to restrict academic freedom for students and faculty in the following fall: they are not allowed anymore to express their opinions in public without restrictions; protests can occur only in a very strictly regulated “time, manner, and place” (i.e., TMP policy), while statements, for example, of solidarity, are regulated by a new policy that must have a disclaimer that specifies whose views are presented and that they do not in any way represent the university (Hanafi, 2025; Sapiro, 2025).

While under conservative attack, research and its dissemination are also frequently hindered by companies that do not wish to have facts concerning them disclosed, and who take legal action against researchers in law, sociology, or political science, just as they do against journalists. This type of legal action is known as a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP). The report on the SLAPP procedures commissioned by the French Minister of Research in 2017 mentions, for instance, the following case:

A specialist in business law ethics, Professor X, has focused his work on the law of July 11, 1986, on tax exemption for the French overseas departments and territories. In one of his studies, he took a particular interest in certain companies specializing in the sale and management of boats. One of these companies considered itself the victim of denigration and sued the author for damages. On December 21, 1994, the TGI de Paris acquitted the plaintiff on the principle of professorial freedom (Report on the SLAPP procedures commissioned by the French minister of research, 20.4.2017; my translation).

Similarly, a Brazilian geographer had to go into exile because she was demonstrating in her work how France and other European countries were exporting pesticides to Brazil (she faced intimidation and threats).

Instead of protecting researchers threatened by firms, American universities, which fear prosecution, have a policy of preventing lawsuits that leads to restrictions on the freedom of research and the dissemination of results, and this is being introduced in France and other European countries with the European General Data Protection Regulation.

Thus, in many liberal democracies, academic freedom faces threats and restrictions stemming from either governmental policies or private interests, and, as we saw, individual academic freedom is less protected by institutional autonomy than in the past. Professional associations increasingly debate this issue, and new organizations have been founded, such as in Germany and France (OALA); however, their conceptions of academic freedom do not always align.

## 4 Conclusion

This article has shown that, rather than a clear-cut distinction between authoritarian and illiberal regimes on one hand, and liberal democracies on the other, the relative autonomy accorded to researchers by the political power, and the degree to which it is protected by the regime and by institutions, should be considered along a continuum. The state protection of academic freedom — as well as that of freedom of expression — has been fragilized in liberal regimes by neoliberalism and by the conservative pressure against critical thought and science, as well as by

private interests. Recent evolutions show that scholars cannot rely on the state and the law to protect this freedom. For this reason, professional associations are increasingly mobilizing on this issue, both nationally and internationally, as exemplified by the International Sociological Association. However, the definitions and perception of threats diverge, as the definition of academic freedom itself does, preventing a more united mobilization.

One of the key points of the crystallization of the debate concerns the relationship between academic freedom and freedom of expression. While it does exist, the boundary between academic freedom and freedom of expression is not always obvious to researchers, as the disclosure of results is likely to have a critical dimension towards government policies, the dominant ideology or corporate policies, and which, while not a matter of opinion, can be curbed by illiberal governments (this is one of the definitions of illiberalism) or by bilious procedures. Similarly, it is part of a researcher's professional ethics to speak out against official lies and denials (for instance, the Armenian genocide in Turkey).

This article offered an overview of current threats to academic freedom and the autonomy of the academic field. To better understand these threats, it calls for a more systematic comparative approach, which would need to be combined with a transnational approach, for at least three reasons: first, forms of restrictions on (academic) freedom circulate from one country to another (just as conceptions of academic freedom did in the past); secondly, the internationalization of higher education confronts scholars with different conditions and traditions, as pointed by Dina Kiwan (2023) in her study on four countries (the US, the UK, the UEA and Lebanon), based on interviews; thirdly, cooperation agreements and joint organization of events, which are part of this internationalization, can face obstacles and tensions because of these differences, as we saw in this paper.

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