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# Defending Academic Freedom or Defending Academic Autonomy? On the Usefulness of the Concept of Academic Freedom

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**Abstract**

The concept of academic freedom is the subject of growing interest. However, it tends to be defined in different, and even contradictory terms. This raises the question of whether the notion provides a sufficiently solid foundation for theoretical reflection and collective action. This article argues that the definitions of academic freedom are closely linked to public debates about the roles that are socially assigned to academics, and the way they should do their job. As such, these definitions are components of both political struggles about the relevance, or lack thereof, of scientific activities for society, and intellectual struggles about the professional standards that should govern scientific activities. Such a heavily-loaded notion appears ill-suited for conceptualisation, and is also likely to prove counter-productive, paradoxically, for actors that aim to defend it. The relevant struggle should be less about defending academic freedom, a category of practice that has become slippery, than about defending academic autonomy, understood as the capacity for academia in general and scientific disciplines in particular to retain control over the norms governing their own activities.

**Keywords**: Academic freedom; Academic Roles; Sociology of science; Scientific autonomy; Politicisation of science.

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Long overlooked (Beaud, 2021a), the concept of academic freedom is now the subject of growing interest in scientific and public debates, not only in countries where it is most obviously threatened. These controversies are regularly fuelled by blatant attacks on academic freedom (e.g., the banning or defunding of entire fields of research on accounts of their supposed ideological bias, such as gender studies and climate science) or, at the very least, events presented as such, although these framings are not always consensual — for example, the disruption of conferences held at universities, student mobilisations and blockades organised in support of Palestine, the supposed influences of "wokism" in academic circles, etc.

This growing salience has prompted the production of several works that attempt to define the concept of academic freedom and categorise the factors that threaten it. In this sense, Stanley Fish's (2014) announcement of the emergence of the new field of "Academic Freedom Studies" (p. 6) seems to have been partially borne out. However, these research efforts do not fully manage to clarify the social meaning and value of academic freedom, in a context of increasing politicisation of the subject. The public controversies mentioned above have indeed led to multiple actors producing discourses and opinions on academic freedom. Not only academics, but also politicians, journalists, activist groups, and private companies are involved in the debates. Accordingly, the types of discourse they produce range from scientific studies[1] to opinion pieces, press articles, and editorials. Opinions also diverge, with the notion of academic freedom assuming (more or less explicitly) markedly different meanings. It is striking to note the extent to which academic freedom can be invoked to justify different, even diametrically opposed, actions or claims. From academic freedom would thus arise both, for example, the freedom for members of the academic community to express their opinions on campus through various modes of action, and the freedom for other members of the same community not to have their teaching or research activities disrupted by these same modes of action. These struggles reveal the semantic plasticity of the concept of academic freedom, which is sometimes more or less implicitly equated with freedom of expression.

These multiple distortions raise the question of whether the concept of academic freedom provides a sufficiently solid foundation for theoretical reflection and collective action. This short piece aims to contribute to this reflection by successively examining the tensions underlying the notion, and the dynamics of the struggles surrounding it. It argues that the definitions of academic freedom are closely linked to the roles that are socially assigned to academics. As such, they are components of political debates about the relevance, or lack thereof, of the social contract for science. Such a heavily loaded notion appears ill-suited for conceptualisation, and is also likely to prove too slippery, paradoxically, for actors that aim to defend it.

## 1 Academic Freedom Under Conditions and Under Tension

It is now well established that, like the concept of freedom in general, the notion of academic freedom is subject to different, even contradictory, definitions. These variations are tangible in the diversity of indicators used by comparative surveys and international monitoring to report on restrictions on academic freedom: while some of them focus on events involving attacks on the physical integrity of academics, restrictions on their movements or professional sanctions (murders, disappearances, abusive trials, house arrest, dismissals, etc.), such as the Scholars at

1. These studies do not necessarily exclude normative positions, which are assumed as such in the writings of Olivier Beaud (2021b), for example: "We have allowed our personal opinions, and even our feelings, on this or that matter to shine through here and there" (p. 23).

Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project,[2] others take a more extensive and systemic approach, seeking to characterise the structural conditions under which academic professions are practised and the more insidious constraints that these can place on academics. As Laurent Jaffro (2022) argues, "an occasional infringement of academic freedom, even if repeated, does not necessarily constitute a threat to it. On the other hand, institutionalised or customary provisions that facilitate or encourage such incidents are threats" (p. 425). The Academic Freedom Index thus seeks to quantify five key indicators: freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, and freedom of academic and cultural expression (Spannagel & Kinzelbach, 2023). Other comparative efforts draw attention to the impact of university management reforms, the precariousness of academic staff, the proliferation of standards governing scientific activity, the development of conditional research funding, and related issues (Heurtaux, 2024).

The diversity of approaches to academic freedom is also evident in the rationales that have been put forward to support the case for granting academics such specific rights. Without claiming to be exhaustive, this diversity can be illustrated by recalling, for example, that Fish (2014) identified five "schools of academic freedom": the "it's just a job" school, according to which academic staff should be given, like other professions, the latitude necessary to carry out the tasks related to their profession; the "for the common good" school, according to which academic freedom is justified by the fact that universities play a part in the realisation of democratic principles, and therefore in a form of social improvement; the "uncommon beings" school, according to which academics have an intellectual and moral status that justifies their exceptional treatment within society; the "academic freedom as critique" school, according to which academic freedom exists to enable academics to criticise the social order and pave the way for forms of progress; and finally the "academic freedom as revolution" school, which takes this logic further by conceiving of academic freedom as an instrument that not only allows but calls for the political engagement of those who benefit from it (pp. 9–14).

These different conceptions have practical consequences. In particular, and to simplify broadly, they can mean that academic freedom applies to academics strictly within the limits of their professional practice, or also in their extra-academic commitments, with debates, as will be further argued below, over where to place the boundary between academic and non-academic activities — for example, is intervening in the general media part of academic practice? Beyond their differences, the different schools of academic freedom all imply that beneficiaries of this freedom are subject to certain obligations or moral considerations: if these individuals enjoy exceptional freedoms, it is because they are engaged in activities that justify the existence of these freedoms and, in doing so, they comply with a number of conditions.

The existence of these conditions is reiterated in several theoretical writings on academic freedom. Thus, for Graeme C. Moodie (1996), "the special freedom(s) of academics is/are conditional on the fulfilment of their academic obligations" (p. 134). Similarly, Pascal Engel (2021) defends a conception of academic freedom as "a kind of controlled freedom, and in this sense, it is no freedom at all". A similar idea underlies several texts that seek to regulate this freedom. For example, the Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure, published in 1915 by the newly created American Association of University Professors (AAUP), states that "the liberty of the scholar within the university to set forth his conclusions, be they what they may, is conditioned by their being conclusions gained by a scholar's method and held in a scholar's spirit; that is to say, they must be the fruits of competent and patient and sincere

2. Scholars At Risk Network, *Academic Freedom Monitoring Project*. https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/actions/academic-freedom-monitoring-project.

inquiry" (cit. in Post, 2006, p. 69). Echoing this, some 80 years later, the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel (1997) clearly states that "academic freedom carries with it the duty to use that freedom in a manner consistent with the scholarly obligation to base research on an honest search for truth. Teaching, research, and scholarship should be conducted in full accordance with ethical and professional standards" (p. 11).

Academic freedom is thus a conditional freedom and, as such, it is subject to tension. The nature of this tension, however, is a social construct that depends primarily on the socially assigned role of academics.

## 2 Roles and Autonomy of Academics

The above description of the five "schools" identified by Fish (2014) shows that each conception of academic freedom involves a definition of the roles of universities and academics within society (whether it be investing in the production and dissemination of knowledge, criticising social norms, etc.). These "roles" should be understood in the sense given to the term by Jacques Lagroye: while they tend to become institutionalised, they are also shaped by those who hold them and are defined in the course of struggles that can pit various actors against each other (Lagroye et al., 2012). Each of the controversies briefly mentioned at the beginning of this article reactivates these struggles. At first glance — and even if this would require thorough research — the struggles seem to revolve around a relatively limited number of practical dilemmas: to what extent, and under what conditions, can we trust the knowledge produced by academics? Is it the responsibility of these professionals to engage in civic life, and if so, in what ways? Are engagement and even criticism legitimate components of academic professions (Gautier & Zancarini-Fournel, 2022)? Is there a place for opinions in the activities of academics and on campuses in general? More broadly, what constitutes legitimate/ethical/professional/honest practice in academic professions, and what, on the contrary, can be considered a transgression or deviation from professional standards?

The internationalisation of both the academic profession and the controversies (or at least the media coverage of them) associated with this profession tends to perpetuate the illusion that there are universal, unambiguous answers to these questions. The implicit working assumption of the international reward system of science is that research is universal by nature and, therefore, governed by moral standards ("excellence", "rigour", "ethics", "integrity", "value freedom", etc.), methods, and techniques that do not fluctuate from one country to the next. Relatedly, deviations from these standards, or practices constructed as such, such as "fraud", "misconduct", "bias", etc., are assumed to be equally recognised in different configurations.

However, several factors stand in the way of such supposedly universal trends. First, the historical structuring of academic roles and fields proceeds from eminently national dynamics: the dominant modes of reasoning and the more or less critical positions of scholars are the product of national habits that have been sedimented over a long period of time and maintained by multiple mechanisms of reproduction (Heilbron, 2015). These dynamics also depend on the epistemic cultures specific to each discipline, which underpin varying logics of knowledge production and dissemination (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). A given academic field may also be structured, depending on its degree of autonomy from other social spheres, by hierarchies and principles of legitimisation that are more or less linked to the scientific *nomos* so that, depending on the configuration at hand, it may be possible to attain prestigious academic positions by conforming to this *nomos*, but also by drawing on other types of resources (occupying admin-

istrative positions, accumulating media visibility, obtaining external funding, etc.) (Merton, 1973[1962]; Bourdieu, 2004). This relative porosity means that the structure of the academic field, and therefore the dominant definition of the role of academics (and, correlatively, that of academic freedom), is likely to be influenced by various actors (academic staff themselves, but also funders, journalists, politicians, etc.) to different extents in different countries and disciplines.

The plural nature of definitions of the role of academics, and therefore of the principles governing the election and promotion of academic staff, is not new and has been documented by numerous sociological studies. However, what is at stake in the controversies surrounding academic freedom is that they give rise to new *social and political demands to clarify, publicly justify, and even codify the usually implicit definitions of academic professions* (Larregue, 2024). Such demands may include, for example, explaining on what ground certain ideas are aired in the media in the name of science; justifying why certain research events and fields are supported rather than others; clarifying the extent to which academic priorities are in line with social, political, and economic agendas in return for taxpayers' money; and putting in place codes of practice and regulators to make sure a set of principles are indeed respected by academics. Thus, the struggles to define legitimate academic roles lose their routinely latent, implicit, or hidden nature. This process has two implications.

Firstly, these struggles involve actors beyond the academic sphere: rather than being confined to a disputatio between scholars in specialist journals and associations, they are framed as public issues and taking place in writings intended for lay audiences, in parliamentary forums, on television programmes, etc., and are thus contributing to a public redefinition of the social contract for science, understood as the tacit agreement that society provides specific resources, rights, and institutional arrangements to the scientific community in return for expected, but unspecified, benefits (Guston, 2000). This de-sectorisation goes further than the routinely relative porosity of academic fields, which implies that hierarchies and practices in these spheres are partially structured by external actors and factors (Bourdieu, 2004). Here, the fundamentals of scientific activities are at stake. The process goes hand in hand with the framing of issues in broader, more universal terms, so that a specific, circumstantial event (e.g. the deplatforming of a given speaker on a particular campus) can give rise to a more global controversy on, for example, the weight of "wokism" and the "radical left" in universities, freedom of expression on campuses, the honesty and biases of academics, the usefulness of academia altogether, the threats it could pose to society, and the extent to which it should be regulated. These broadening trends dilute the specificity of the initial problem: academia in its entirety becomes the subject of controversy, regulation, and retaliation.

Secondly, and correlatively, these controversies may give rise to (attempts at) legal codification of academic virtue. The inclusion of scientific ethics and integrity in more or less flexible law is a step in this direction.[3] So are attempts to define the moral boundaries and norms of academic practices, and the contours of legitimate public expression by academics (CNRS, 2025) — and, consequently, the definition of deviations from these standards. A famous example of such attempts in France is Amendment no. 234 of 28 October 2020, presented by right-wing Senator Laure Darcos during the debates on the Research Programming Law (LPR), aimed at supplementing Article L. 952–2 of the Education Code with a paragraph worded as follows: "Academic freedoms shall be exercised in accordance with the values of the Republic". The amendment was rejected, but at the more local level, some universities have been pressurised,

3. See for example Robin (2022) on the laws governing research data in France.

with success, by regional presidents to sign charters with similar wording, as conditions to receive regional financial support. Equally in the United States, universities have recently been pressurised to endorse the Trump administration's political agenda (e.g., by advancing conservative ideas on their campuses) in exchange for favourable access to federal grants.

These dynamics are often accompanied by forms of bureaucratisation: they lead to the establishment of procedures and mechanisms whose stated objective is to promote standards and provide a framework for investigating cases of alleged transgression. This bureaucratisation itself goes hand in hand with forms of professionalisation — for example, the emergence of administrative staff or academic advisors specialising in issues of academic ethics, integrity, and freedom (Hedgecoe, 2020; Boncourt et al., 2025). Codification, bureaucratisation, and professionalisation of "censors" have been denounced as likely to contribute to the establishment of new "surveillance regimes" for academic staff (Aldrin et al., 2022). As they are based on broad principles, they have also been criticised as being blind to the specificity of epistemic cultures, so that standards developed to address issues specific to one field may ultimately be extended to others without fully integrating their peculiarities, thereby restricting the freedom of researchers in disciplines thus dispossessed to mobilise a particular approach, method, etc. A well-documented example of such processes is that of research ethics committees, which tend to operate on the basis of principles originally designed to address problems in the biomedical sciences and ill-suited to the social sciences (Siméant-Germanos, 2022). This means that academic regulations are not only linked to tensions between academic and non-academic actors. They are also connected to professional struggles within academia, and especially between disciplines (Aust & Gozlan, 2019) — with a tendency for dominant disciplines to impose their standards on others, in a form of imperialism (Lazear, 2000; Fourcade et al., 2015).

## 3 Defending Academic Autonomy

As the very notion of academia becomes controversial and academics are subjected to various forms of pressure and attack, several collective actions take on the mission of defending academic freedom. In doing so, they must deal with tensions. Firstly, invoking the defence of a principle as general as academic freedom is a double-edged sword: it can both be a potential vehicle for framing a given cause as being linked to fundamental rights (and thus garnering broad support), and pave the way for the type of disciplinary imperialism mentioned above, in a kind of "one type of academic freedom fits all" dynamic. In other words, it should be acknowledged that the academic freedom of social scientists (or any discipline of the reader's choice) cannot be defined and claimed in exactly the same terms as the academic freedom of biomedical scientists (or any other discipline of the reader's choice). A challenge, then, for mobilisations for academic freedom is to frame their cause in a way that keeps all academia on board, and does not end up having adverse consequences for some of its parts.

Secondly, pleas for the defence of academic freedom regularly include demands for the production of standards, procedures, and mechanisms intended to protect this freedom, but which may also have the opposite effect, depending on how they are implemented. A good example of such risks and ambiguities is the uncertainty that currently surrounds the implementation of the controversial Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 in UK universities, which has come into force from 1 August 2025 after a protracted process involving the Labour government scaling back and abandoning some of the provisions introduced by its Conservative predecessor for fear, among other difficulties, that the Act might end up having negative

impact on minority groups, in the name of defending free speech and academic freedom (UK Government, 2025).

From this point of view, the defence of the autonomy of scientific activity may probably only be achieved through a double "re-sectorisation" or "re-monopolisation": demanding a conception of academic freedom tailored to each epistemic culture and orchestrating the implementation of the related mechanisms by relevant professionals. In other words, it may be most productive to shift the focus from the public and political battle over grand principles to the sectoral and disciplinary implementation of these principles. The relevant struggle should be less about defending academic freedom, a category of practice that has become slippery, than about defending academic autonomy, in the scientific sense of the term,[4] i.e., the idea that academia should be governed by norms specific to academia, and disciplines by criteria specific to the rules that govern the distinct ways in which they pursue knowledge. This suggests that peer review should be defended as a cardinal principle for regulating academic controversies. It also implies that the multifaceted character of the role of academics should be recognised and accepted as part and parcel of academic debates, rather than something that should be forcefully harmonised and regulated. Diversity, after all, is what fuels academic debates and the pursuit of truth.

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4. As defined by Pierre Bourdieu (2004) and in contrast to the indigenous and neo-managerial meaning of the term, which underpins, for example, French Law No. 2007–1199 of 10 August 2007, known as the University Autonomy Law — and whose official title was, incidentally, "Law on the freedoms and responsibilities of universities".

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