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‘Viewpoint Diversity’ and the Erosion of Academic Freedom

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Abstract
Higher education has become a key target for current anti-democratic and far-right political forces seeking to reshape society. Drawing on examples from the Netherlands (Claassen motion), Belgium (Cofnas hire), and the United States (Project 2025), the essay argues that it is important to recognize and connect the dots between different modes of attacks. Alongside the more recognizable measures such as budget cuts, the erosion of academic freedom also proceeds through more subtler strategies like promoting ‘viewpoint diversity’. This concept is currently put forward, the essay contends, to redefine academic freedom, allowing political agendas to challenge established scholarship while undermining rigorous academic standards. The essay offers distinctions between academic freedom and freedom of speech as well as between different understandings of diversity in order to enable us to recognize the deployment of ‘viewpoint diversity’ as a political strategy designed to weaken university autonomy and academic freedom.

Keywords
‘Viewpoint diversity’; academic freedom; freedom of speech; (different understandings of) diversity; attack on higher education

Education as a frontline for anti-democratic forces

In February 2026, merely weeks after a new government was sworn in, the House of Representatives in the Netherlands adopted a motion to safeguard the 'diversity of perspectives' at Dutch universities.[1] The motion was introduced by far-right politician Claassen (PVV, subsequently Groep Markuszower) and received a solid majority of votes, notably from the parties of the previous far-right Schoof government joined by the three Christian parties. In contrast to the immense budget cuts announced by the previous government, which had led to great commotion and actions across the sector of higher education, the adoption of this motion hardly received attention in the media or society at large.

Just two years earlier, the budget cuts in higher education were widely recognized as a political attack. As Ingrid Robeyns (2024) argued, besides being ill-advised, unwanted, and illegitimate, there was no economic necessity for the cuts. Rather, austerity measures were deliberately deployed to discipline and reshape the universities, or in the cynical words of a far-right PVV politician, the budget cuts were needed to 'provide educational institutions with an opportunity to rethink their priorities' (Bracke, 2024b). The strategy of the axe was predictable: references to 'indoctrination', 'wokeness', and '(lack of) neutrality' had been regular occurrences on the right within the 2023 electoral debates. Moreover, when university campuses became significant sites of resistance against institutional and national complicity with Israel's genocide in Gaza, the political urge by those in power to discipline academic institutions only increased. The resulting draconian budget cuts, in other words, were readily understood as a political attack on the university. In sharp contrast, the Claassen motion was passed in silence, leaving its presentation in terms of 'strengthening academic freedom' uncontested.

While the instability and incompetence of the Schoof government led to its fall before the budget cuts could be implemented and the new Jetten government subsequently (mostly) reversed those plans, the far-right policy approach to education and research was harmful in several respects. Harm was caused by what Timothy Snyder, in his book *On Tyranny*, identifies as 'anticipatory obedience', as some university administrations initiated reorganizations to already prepare for and align with the announced cuts in advance. Significant harm, moreover, resulted from the mechanism that had been so blatantly on display: if the powers of the day do not like the knowledge that is produced or transmitted on universities campuses, they can intervene by with parliamentary questions and financial interventions. Such direct and substantial threats to academic freedom are central to how anti-democratic, authoritarian, and fascist forces operate across the globe today.

More than a century ago, US philosopher John Dewey argued that education is the midwife of democracy, which cannot be taken for granted but must be born anew every generation. Authoritarian forces today understand this mechanism well and are aggressively approaching education as a pivotal site of struggle or frontline for their politics. Yet it is crucial to recognize that different tactics are deployed at this frontline. The two modes of intervention juxtaposed in the opening of this essay might seem very different: from egregious, contentious budget cuts which elicited national protests to a brief motion that seems commonsensical – surely, different perspectives are good for democracy? – and was passed in silence. But the shift from throwing an axe into higher education to a concern with 'diversity of perspectives' within the universities is not a case of inconsistency nor a change of heart. Rather, as I argue in this essay, it represents a tactical or strategic shift in a political battle that seeks to reshape higher education in a far-reaching manner.

The university as a site of knowledge production (research) and knowledge transmission (education) has indeed been a target par excellence of far-right political forces engaged in a struggle for cultural hegemony. These forces have increasingly taken a 'destroy

[1] The motion can be found here:
https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/kamervragen/detail?id=2026D07123&did=2026D07123

and rebuild' approach,[2] suggesting that universities have become 'irredeemable' and need to be 'reconquered'. These political mobilizations against the university come in the wake of many decades of democratization, both with regard to the demographic composition of the bodies of students and professors (less male, less white, less affluent class than it once used to be) and knowledge that is produced (new topics and themes, new scholarly approaches). Such democratization processes are often the outcome of contentious struggles, and while imperfect and unfinished, they represent deep (epistemological) engagements with and commitments to the pursuit of truth and knowledge. A pursuit that is multiple and messy yet remains wedded to the possibility of better, more reliable knowledge.

This scholarly pursuit of truth and knowledge has produced more reliable knowledge about topics that might be considered contentious in parts of society at large, such as processes of racialization and racism, gender, (human induced) climate change, (settler) coloniality, among many other matters. As certain political forces consider such knowledge to be politically disturbing and inconvenient, academic production of knowledge is increasingly dismissed in terms of 'left-wing bias', 'woke', and 'indoctrination' and framed as part of a 'cultural war'. More spectacular examples of political interventions within this 'cultural war' include Orban's far-reaching closures of academic programs (notably gender studies) as well as an entire university (Central European University) and the frontal attacks on research and teaching programs orchestrated by the current Trump administration. The blueprint for the latter is laid out in Project 2025, which consolidates many views and visions elaborated by right-wing political think tanks over the past decades. In one of such vision pieces, 'Education: How to destroy and reconquer' (2023), the dual strategy is explicitly and succinctly laid out: breaking down higher education as it is now, notably by 'using state powers to raise the costs for the Left and to strip its funding', while 'build[ing] institutions to win back public [education]' according to far-right political visions and programs. Such strategies, in other words, are geared towards eliminating academic freedom and the autonomy of the university as an institution of knowledge production and transmission.

'Viewpoint diversity'

This is the context in which the current political focus on 'diversity of perspectives' within higher education, also known as 'viewpoint diversity', must be situated (Riskin, 2026). While authoritarian interventions and budget cuts seem the most effective ways to dismantle the university as we know it, they require a certain amount of political power and notably governmental control over budgets. This is different for the insistence on 'viewpoint diversity', which can operate as a more liberal mode of attack that can be initiated and deployed by individuals and lobby groups who don't necessarily have the power to directly impose restrictions on academic institutions but can contribute to eroding the principle of academic freedom. While this mode of attack is closely aligned with the weaponization of freedom of speech to erode academic freedom (Reichman, 2019; Bracke, 2023), it adds another layer of rhetorical power as well as confusion through its usage of the term 'diversity'.

The idea of 'viewpoint diversity' is usually traced back to David Horowitz, who is known for decrying the purported lack of 'intellectual diversity' and 'intellectual pluralism' on US campuses (see e.g. *The Campus Blacklist*, 2003). Horowitz' campaign to promote 'intellectual diversity', notably through his *Academic Bill of Rights* (2002/2004), makes two things very clear. First, it aims to reformulate the notion of academic freedom as it has been elaborated by the American Association of University Professors in 1915 and to initiate a broader cultural and political struggle over the meaning academic freedom. Second,

[2] See e.g. the explicit plea, published in 2023, by Arthur Milikh and Scott Yenor called 'Education: How to destroy and reconquer' (https://tomklingenstein.com/education-how-to-destroy-and-reconquer/).

Horowitz is deliberate about the rhetorical strategy that would best serve such purpose. Addressing how to engage students in this struggle, he writes:

> I encourage them to use the language that the left has deployed so effectively in behalf of its own agendas. Radical professors have created a 'hostile learning environment' for conservative students. There is a lack of 'intellectual diversity' on college faculties and in academic classrooms. The conservative viewpoint is 'underrepresented' in the curriculum and on its reading lists. The university should be an 'inclusive' and intellectually 'diverse' community. (Horowitz, 2003:18)

Horowitz thus suggests mobilizing the value and recognition of notions of diversity, inclusion, and representation to push a very different agenda, driven by the idea that diversity, inclusion, and representation have 'gone too far' or are not valuable in the first place, and should be reversed. As Dutch anthropologist Annelies Moors points out in her discussion about 'viewpoint diversity', Horowitz's approach provides a powerful example of 'how the liberal concept of academic freedom can be used to promote illiberal practices' (Moors 2026: 131). Over the past two decades, this deliberate appropriation of the language of democratization for political agendas that seek to counter and reverse processes of democratization has mainstreamed to an extent that crucial differences in agenda or purpose that lie behind the term 'diversity' are easily and often overlooked.

The narrative of 'viewpoint diversity' has rapidly gained traction over the past decade. Both Trump administrations have relied on this narrative, and during Trump's current presidency it is deployed aggressively – and linked to funding decisions – to gain a stranglehold on the universities (Riskin, 2026). The recent 'diversity of perspectives' motion in the Netherlands has a longer history: in 2017, Pieter Duisenberg, politician of the (centre) right-wing VVD and subsequent chair of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands, introduced a motion against 'political homogeneity at universities'. This motion, Moors points out, came in the wake of an initiative by the Minister of Education that sought to increase the number of female full professors in Dutch academia, which was miserably low at the time (17%). Strikingly, this prompted Duisenberg to argue that 'a different kind of diversity is lacking in academia, namely a diversity of perspectives' (Moors 2026: 130). Duisenberg tabled a motion to commission the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) to prepare a report on possible self-censorship and a lack of 'diversity of perspectives' within Dutch academy. The KNAW (2018) subsequently found no evidence of a structural threat of self-censorship nor of a restriction of 'diversity of perspectives'. As Moors (2026: 132) argues, the notion of diversity that the KNAW relied on in its investigation differed from the one Duisenberg had put forward: in line with academic standards and practices, the KNAW indeed considered epistemic – not political – diversity.

At the time of writing, debates related to 'viewpoint diversity' have erupted in relation to the controversy around the hiring of Nathan Cofnas, a scholar seeking to revive the long debunked and discredited tradition of scientific racism (now revamped as 'race realism'), at Ghent University, Belgium. Proponents of this hire, including the professor who has set up the post-doctoral position where Cofnas would be able to practice such scientific racism, consistently frame the hire in terms of academic freedom which would revolve around or at least include 'viewpoint diversity'. Strikingly, academic freedom can thus be used to legitimize the appointment of a candidate with hardly any peer-reviewed scholarship in political philosophy for a position in political philosophy – a practice that runs counter the fact that academic freedom is grounded in (proof of) knowledge and qualification.

Considering the concerted ideological and political attacks on knowledge production and transmission that have been building up over the past decades, none of this is surprising. Yet every new instance underlines how important it is that institutions dedicated to the pursuit of truth and knowledge recognize how 'freedom of speech' and 'viewpoint diversity' are deployed as a strategy to erode academic freedom and learn how to respond

adequately. At the time of writing, the response of Ghent University to the Cofnas controversy is deeply troubling: any acknowledgement of the problems with scientific racism seem to occur in a personal capacity. The institutional response, however, does not move significantly beyond an affirmation of 'freedom of speech'. This is exemplary for a deep confusion about academic freedom as well as about diversity. This affirmation of 'freedom of speech' fails to recognize a political strategy at work that is aimed at eroding academic freedom. We might note that there was little confusion about the significance of the Cofnas hire for a larger far-right political agenda in white supremacist circles, where reportedly the champagne was flowing (Raspoet, 2026).

Distinctions that matter

Protecting and fostering academic freedom requires clarity on what it is and what it is not. Similarly, interrupting the ideological work that 'viewpoint diversity' is currently made to do requires a more precise understanding of what diversity signifies in relation to academic freedom. In this respect, the following distinctions matter:

1/ Freedom of speech vs. academic freedom

These two principles are affiliated and like many other democratic freedoms, they are first and foremost understood as the protection of individuals, assemblies of individuals, and institutions vis-à-vis the government and possible government persecution. Yet they are also distinct from each other: academic freedom or the freedom of inquiry that pertains to an academic context is a *qualified* freedom which is significantly more disciplined than freedom of speech. Claims such as 'the earth is flat', 'vaccines cause autism', or 'climate change is a hoax', as well as a range of sexist and racist statements, are often – but not always – protected by freedom of speech. Within the contours of academic freedom, however, such claims must be scrutinized and when there is substantive and reliable evidence against such claims, they must be rejected. As Canadian philosopher of academic freedom Shannon Dea (2018) argues, 'a university isn't a town square where anyone has the right to say anything they like'. While freedom of speech regulates the town square, or indeed the café or the talk show, it is not the relevant organizing principle of the university. Moreover, as US historian Priya Satia (2026) reminds us, the principle of academic freedom moves beyond the protection of individual professors to the extent that it relates to a notion of the common good. The principled distinction between freedom of speech and academic freedom is critical to the university and its mission of the pursuit of truth and knowledge. While we can and should continue to think in sophisticated and multiple ways about the nature of truth and knowledge, blurring the distinction between freedom of speech and academic freedom signals the erosion of academic institutions (Bracke, 2023; Bracke, 2024a).

2/ Diversity of social locations vs. diversity of ideas

The rhetorical power of 'viewpoint diversity' is anchored in a wider societal recognition of the value of diversity, however superficially or problematically it sometimes may be institutionalized (Ahmed, 2012; Bracke, 2014). The notion of diversity that has become part of institutional narratives and practices is grounded in the realm of material conditions. In other words, diversity in this regard refers to social locations or positionalities as they are shaped by inequal power relations and material conditions which can be objectified. 'Viewpoint diversity' introduces a significant shift in this respect: it seeks to introduce or integrate the *realm of ideas* into a framework that was elaborated with respect to the *realm of material conditions*. This move is at odds with how diversity policies operate within institutional HR policies, where they are anchored on social locations – not necessarily identities – and material conditions of individuals working within these institutions. HR policies that would require the disclosure and monitoring of the ideas or beliefs of first applicants and subsequently employees – whether religious or political, including affiliations to religious or political associations – in order to regulate the institution's 'viewpoint

diversity' would operate outside of acceptable legislative frameworks, as political opinions would become a consideration in hiring and possible changes in political affiliations would need to be monitored throughout one's career.

3/ Different epistemologies vs. diversity of ideas

The realm of ideas is of course crucial to academia and there is a wide array of differences that matter when it comes to scientific and scholarly production within the universities: these are the vital differences of theoretical approaches, methodologies, epistemologies, paradigms, and so on. Theoretical or methodological discussions and disagreements, and often straightforward clashes, are at the very heart of academic practice. A difference or plurality of scholarly approaches is central to how academia has functioned and continues to function, which is something that 'viewpoint diversity' narratives seem to deliberately obscure. Yet this kind of difference – a term that might be more appropriate than diversity in this respect – is qualified and (inter)disciplinary: it refers not to the diversity of ideas of the town square or the talk show, but to rigorous scholarly work that is deeply and critically engaged with existing theories, methodologies, epistemologies, building on already acquired knowledge while ever evolving and attuned to changing conditions of our world.

Endgame

Reviving and revamping scientific racism (calling it 'race realism') that has long and in rigorous ways been debunked and discredited by solid scholarship does by no means fall under the auspices of academic freedom. Just like re-introducing 'the earth is flat' (and perhaps calling it 'earth realism'?) in the halls of academia, while ignoring the scholarship of the past centuries that has discredited such a view, would not be an expression of academic freedom. Yet in the face of the current consolidation of solid knowledge on 'race', gender, climate change, migration, among others, a range of political forces are trying to redefine academic freedom in a way that allows them to hold on to views that are not reliable or have been discredited. Crucially, they do so not through rigorous scholarly engagement but through invoking 'viewpoint diversity' – a concept that, as Horowitz made clear two decades ago, emerged with a strategic purpose to politicize and redefine academic spaces.

Let there be no confusion about the endgame of these political attacks. While (far) right forces have been decrying 'cancel culture' during their rise to political power, once in power these same forces have embarked upon 'cancel sprees' – making sure the funding or accreditation for research or teaching on social inequality, 'race', gender, climate, migration, Islamophobia, etc. is dismantled, as the current actions of the Trump administration in the US amply illustrate. Just like 'free speech warriors', once they own the (social) media platforms, have proceeded to ban speech they do not like. Freedom of speech and 'viewpoint diversity' are not the endgame. Let alone academic freedom, which already is displaced and eroded by framing the public discussion on higher education in terms of 'freedom of speech' instead of the standards of quality and qualification of academic inquiry. Let there be no confusion about the fact that 'viewpoint diversity' arguments are rhetorical and political strategies for the cultural battle of 'destroying and reconquering' institutions of higher education as it has been announced, loud and clear, by (far) right forces around the globe. As Lisa Siraganian (2025) concludes: 'viewpoint diversity' is an argument made in bad faith.

It is high time for universities to recognize what is at stake, when it comes to the autonomy of institutions of higher education and the protection of academic freedom, and act accordingly. This includes understanding the qualified character of academic freedom, its distinction from freedom of speech – freedom of speech is not a reliable way to protect academic freedom, as it is currently effectively deployed to erode the latter – and the categorically mistaken yet dangerous 'viewpoint diversity' line of argument. And subsequently, it includes being bold and taking the action that is required.

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