DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

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DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 13, Issue 1
https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.101176
Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281
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‘Unwoke the University’: A Mere Question of Academic Freedom? Insights from Belgium

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Abstract
Donald Trump’s 2025 return to power has led to a spectacular comeback of academic freedom in academic research and university policies. While echoing earlier trends, it has prompted renewed concern about the fragility of academic freedom even in established democracies. In response, academic freedom has re-emerged as a political and institutional resource, with proposals such as the constitutionalisation of academic freedom. While these initiatives may offer a more robust legal protection and generate a necessary debate on the role of research and universities in a well-functioning democracy, they could also, if insufficiently prepared, easily backfire. Furthermore, as indicated by a discussion of recent developments in Belgium, academic freedom cannot be addressed in isolation from broader political debates. The debate about woke shows that it should be related to a broader analysis of the politics of knowledge. Defending academic freedom requires recognising its political embeddedness and addressing broader challenges to democratic values and knowledge production.

Keywords
Academic freedom, Belgium, de-democratisation, politics of knowledge, university, woke.

The issue of academic freedom has made a spectacular comeback in academic research and university policies since Donald Trump returned to the White House in 2025. US universities and research institutions have faced unprecedented attacks targeting the autonomy of universities, institutional initiatives against discrimination, research funding on specific topics, and entire fields of inquiry deemed to promote woke thinking. The Israeli offensive on Gaza and the forms of solidarity with Palestinians it triggered on several campuses provided further possibilities to repress universities and scholars under the banner of fighting against antisemitism (della Porta, 2026).

Such attacks are not new. They echo developments observed in countries such as Hungary, Russia or Turkey (Frangville et al., 2021), underscoring the strong connection between the state of democracy and the protection of academic freedom. These trends were foreshadowed by earlier initiatives in US states such as Florida, and were long prepared by think tanks and private foundations that have patiently cultivated the ideological groundwork of the conservative revolution currently reshaping the world of ideas (Messer-Davidow, 1993; Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2019; Paternotte and Verloo forthcoming).

Yet, the scope and intensity of developments since January 2025 - and crucially their occurrence at federal level - have produced an impact without precedent. They have also functioned as a wake-up call both within and beyond the United States. Indeed, such attacks were widely unexpected in a country commonly perceived as a global academic lighthouse and a beacon of democracy. As consolidated democracies themselves can erode, so too can academic freedom. This experience reveals that the current state of affairs is more fragile that we thought and can easily collapse, including at home.

A return of academic freedom

In response to such developments, academic freedom has re-emerged as an intellectual and a political resource. Already central in a growing body of research, it has acquired renewed prominence in debates among scholars. Far from being limited to intellectual inquiry, academic freedom has also inspired new institutional policies. Universities and governments have expanded solidarity schemes to host scholars at risk, sometimes specifically tailored to attract scholars based in the United States. As recent attacks are often interpreted as attempts to curtail researchers' freedoms, there have also been renewed calls for stronger legal and political safeguards. In Belgium, Édouard Delruelle, professor of political philosophy and adviser to the authorities of the Université de Liège, has suggested to constitutionalise academic freedom[1]. This proposal mirrors the reasoning adopted to protect abortion following the US Supreme Court's Dobbs Supreme Court decision in 2022 and echoes comparable initiatives in France[2].

This debate unfolds against a backdrop of intensified political pressure on French-speaking Belgian universities. The Université de Liège has recently been targeted by the right-wing party Mouvement réformateur (MR) and its leader Georges-Louis Bouchez. More broadly, this party has multiplied criticisms against universities, fostering a climate in which academic institutions experience themselves as under siege[3]. Academics are also portrayed – often in overtly populist terms - as malevolent elites detached from everyday realities, allegedly responsible, alongside journalists (especially those belonging to public broadcast) and the left, for the current state of Brussels and Wallonia.

In addition to allegations of leftism and discrimination against right-wing scholars, the Université libre de Bruxelles has been charged with tolerating antisemitism. A prolonged student occupation in solidarity with the people of Gaza and the university authorities'

[1] https://www.lqj.uliege.be/cms/c_20543173/fr/inscrire-la-liberte-academique-dans-la-constitution#notes

[2] https://franceuniversites.fr/actualite/rapport-defendre-la-liberte-academique/

[3] Francophone rectors, sometimes together with their Flemish counterparts, have repeatedly denounced attacks against academic freedom, both in Belgium and abroad. http://www.cref.be/communication/

response not only divided the Brussels Jewish community, historically close to the ULB, but were also instrumentalised by the MR against the university. Drawing on the trope of 'islamo-leftism', critics often related the occupation to the alleged dominance of the extreme left on campus and the presence of a sizable Muslim minority among students. For some actors, this also provided an opportunity to reaffirm secularist credentials by denouncing a supposed betrayal of the university's foundational values, historically established by the local Free Masonry against catholic intellectual influence.

In this context, initiatives to constitutionalise academic freedom do not only aim to offer a better protection through a more robust legal mechanism, but also to generate a public debate on the role of research and universities in a well-functioning democracy. While I think it may be an effective short-term political strategy, I would like to raise two objections. First, if insufficiently prepared, it could easily backfire. Although current university leadership might be supportive, this can rapidly change. Moreover, it remains unclear how parties such as MR and the N-VA would position themselves were the issue raised in Parliament. The N-VA does not seem to have a clear university policy apart from defunding, and its 2024 elections manifesto[4] recommends universities to adopt a 'Freedom Declaration' inspired by the *Stanford Academic Freedom Declaration*[5]. This reference also reveals the existence of a conservative counter-discourse on academic freedom and its presence in Belgium. This observation leads to a second objection: reducing the current situation to a mere question of academic freedom would be a misreading of what is at stake both nationally and internationally. Academic freedom cannot be addressed in isolation from broader political debates and it would therefore be an analytical error to depoliticise it. This is precisely where the debate about woke is insightful.

The polysemy of academic freedom

Academic freedom is neither a neutral term, as claimed by Olivier Beaud (2021, p. 315), nor an unambiguous concept lending itself to a universally accepted definition. Aware of this, some conservative and right-wing actors have elaborated alternatives approaches to academic freedom as well as political strategies to promote them inside and outside academic institutions. This means that a broader public debate on the topic could become a springboard for these ideas. This is for instance the raison d'être of the Flemish organisation Hypatia, which defines itself as 'an independent group of academics concerned about threats to academic freedom and freedom of expression'[6]. Established by well-known academic figures, it works as a think tank and focuses on woke and cancel culture, framed as 'the more acute threats at present'[7] to academic freedom.

The most prevalent alternative approach centres on the alleged lack of ideological diversity on campuses, attributed to the hegemony of leftist and progressive ideas. This would constrain the academic freedom of conservative scholars, who would feel unsafe, marginalised, deplatformed, or cancelled, and lead to forms of (self)censorship. The lack of 'viewpoint diversity' would also undermine the quality of science because the process of knowledge production would be less balanced. In Belgium, this argument has been articulated extensively by KUL philosopher Andreas de Block (2023).

From this perspective, universities should not only promote diversity related to gender, race or class but also ideological diversity. MR staff member Nadia Geerts expresses this position clearly in an op-ed published in the French media *Marianne*:

[4] https://www.n-va.be/verkiezingen/programma

[5] This document originates from a symposium held in 2022 at Stanford University. Speakers included Jonathan Haidt, Peter Thiel, Gad Saad, Eric Kaufmann, Greg Lukianoff, Steven Pinker, Douglas Murray, and Jordan Peterson. https://cli.stanford.edu/events/conference-symposium/academic-freedom-conference

[6] https://www.hypatia-academia.be/

[7] Ibid.

> It then becomes, for topics in which the aim is less to reach some hypothetical truth than to form an informed point of view, a matter of guaranteeing pluralism by allowing different viewpoints—likewise 'informed'—to be expressed, since knowledge of the same facts does not necessarily lead to identical convictions. It is therefore perfectly healthy that, within our public media as well as our universities, there should be journalists and university professors with diverse political sensibilities, who scrupulously leave their personal convictions at the door in order to transmit their knowledge with a constant concern for objectivity and respect for democratic pluralism[8].

Such claims are increasingly coupled with demands to protect free speech on campus, which may lead to new legal and institutional arrangements as happened in 2023 in the United Kingdom through the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act[9]. They are also reinforced by renewed calls for institutional neutrality. This idea, formalised at the University of Chicago in 1967, implies that an institution should be neutral to allow its members to express their views freely. It has made an impressive comeback in recent years, along with calls to universities to restrain themselves in public debate (Bracke, 2025; Soucek, 2026).

Some scholars take these ideas very seriously and mobilise to promote alternative platforms. This is the case of a small group of ULB scholars led by biologist Éric Muraille, who launched a new seminar series entitled *Sciences and Society* in 2025. This series aims 'to reaffirm the role of the university as a space for open debate, including—and especially—on the most controversial issues'[10]. To date, it has consisted of three lectures. The first one, by CNRS sociologist Kristoff Talin, tried to find out whether **'**religions hinder scientific knowledge'**,** the second, by retired biologist Jacques Balthazart (ULiège), explored the 'biology of homosexuality' and the last one , on 'foreign interference in university campuses and the radicalisation of students'**,** was given by French investigative journalist Nora Bussigny. These events have generated growing criticism as well as significant student protest. While the series may be presented as an effort to diversify and enrich debates at university, it is difficult not to interpret it simultaneously as a political strategy to test the limits of what can be said on campus and what the university authorities are willing to tolerate, as well as to fabricate evidence of censorship at university. This reading helps explain – for instance - why the first two lectures took place on the ULB's main campus, which primarily hosts the social sciences and humanities.

To conclude, many analysts have insisted that this alternative approach to academic freedom relies on a deliberate conflation between academic freedom and freedom of speech (Ridley, 2020; Wilson & Kamola, 2021). Freedom of speech applies to all citizens (including scholars) entitling them to say whatever they feel appropriate, regardless of whether it is true or not. Academic freedom, by contrast, relies on a more demanding form of expression. It designates academics' right to research, teach, and express themselves freely in their domain of expertise, providing that they submit their work to disciplinary validation and academic ethics. So, they should listen to their peers and potentially revise their position if they are proven wrong (Scott, 2019; Beaud, 2021; Bracke, 2024). Consequently, when academics say some bullshit, they are not protected by academic freedom (Fassin, 2024), and academic freedom does not apply to non-academics.

[8] https://www.marianne.net/agora/humeurs/nadia-geerts-media-universite-la-lumiere-n-est-ni-de-droite-ni-de-gauche

[9] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/16/contents/2025-08-01

[10] https://www.21news.be/des-chercheurs-de-lulb-lancent-un-cycle-de-conferences-sur-des-sujets-sensibles/

Returning to the *Sciences and Society* series, it is notable that Nora Bussigny is not a social scientist but an undercover journalist who has recently published a book supposedly disclosing the prevalence of antisemitism at ULB (Bussigny, 2025). Unless one dismisses social sciences as a valid scientific field of research, her talk, regardless of its interest, had therefore nothing to do neither with science nor with academic freedom. Moreover, as said earlier, speakers are expected to comply with scientific requirements in their own field of expertise and submit to appropriate modes of validation. This also casts doubt on the first two lectures. Actually, following a systematic debunking of a report by Talin and Gingras[11], the Faculty of Medicine voted in March 2026 to withdraw its official endorsement of the series.

Politics of knowledge

The above discussion about academic freedom shows an interesting paradox. Conservative scholars accuse progressive colleagues of ideological bias and exhort them to observe a strict duty of neutrality in their own research. At the same time, they ask university and public authorities to take values into account to ensure free speech for right-wing scholars, including by hiring ideological diverse scholars, and claim this would guarantee a more balanced science. Against a simplistic approach to Max Weber's axiological neutrality (Kalinowski, 2005; Fassin and Ibos, 2025) – a concept often reclaimed by conservative scholars to denounce a politicisation of science – , this short piece suggests another way of understanding this paradox. Following critical epistemologies, it invites scholars to reflect on the complex relation between values and knowledge production, bringing politics back into the conversation. Knowledge is as social and political as anything else. Therefore, it would be naive to assume that science, as a form of knowledge production, is politically neutral or disconnected from broader social and political debates (Domínguez Rubio & Baert 2012; Epstein 2006). This is a contentious field that relies on internal and external struggles and would be best understood through the notion of 'politics of knowledge' (Paternotte & Verloo, forthcoming). This raises numerous questions such as: What is the relation between specific values and specific forms of knowledge? How does science differ from activism? What makes valid scientific knowledge? How do the characteristics and circumstances of the producer of knowledge influence the process of knowledge production? For whom or what is research produced?

All are central questions in the epistemology of social sciences and humanities. The aim, in this piece, is not to solve these complex debates, but to highlight how they relate to the issue of academic freedom. This is where the debate about woke is helpful. As a reminder, it erupted in Belgium in early 2023 when, on both sides of the linguistic border, when leading right-wing parties published on the issue. The Centre Jean Gol, the study centre of the MR, published a study by activist Nadia Geerts entitled *Wokisme, ce nouveau totalitarisme dont on ne peut pas dire le nom*,[12], later expanded into a book (Geerts, 2024) and followed by another study on the same topic.[13]Soon after, future prime minister and N-VA leader Bart De Wever published a full book on the topic, *Over woke* (2023) (Deleixhe & Paternotte, 2024). Both volumes discuss at length problems in certain fields of research and the policies of various Belgian universities (Paternotte, 2025).

As argued in a forthcoming book edited with Martin Deleixhe, the debate about woke is not a scientific debate, but a public dispute about science and knowledge production. Anti-woke activists often frame their mobilisation as a defence of academic freedom against totalitarian and ideological approaches to science and a form of resistance against threats of (self) censorship. Sometimes, they also contest specific methodologies and engage in epistemological debates, often in support of neopositivist claims against situated

[11] https://pubpeer.com/publications/FE3773B5937A6746D3EC2A1F726061#1
[12] https://www.cjg.be/le-wokisme-ce-nouveau-totalitarisme-dont-on-ne-peut-prononcer-le-nom/
[13] https://www.cjg.be/une-regression-sociale-nommee-wokisme/

epistemologies, that are ridiculed as postmodern fantasies. However, as we also argue, anti-woke activism is first and foremost a political battle. Despite their internal diversity, these actors converge on a strong although relatively small ideological agenda that expresses their democratic scepticism and aims to rehabilitate forms of inegalitarianism.

The culture war framework is useful to understand how this political agenda interacts with anti-woke claims about what makes good science. As argued with Mieke Verloo (2021; forthcoming), conservative and right-wing actors do not only aim to hinder and dismantle existing institutions of knowledge production but also proactively promote new structures and practices to gain more control over what constitutes valid knowledge and, ultimately, what counts as truth. They do so because they know that knowledge matters to politics and because science enjoys a specific legitimacy in comparison to other institutions of knowledge production (Pető, 2021). In other words, these actors do not only ambition to increase the diversity of ideas in the academic market and many do not plan to change their mind if they are exposed to better arguments. Rather, they are planting the seeds of alternative ideas with the goal of taking over academia by making it more aligned with their own values. In many countries, they do so by draping themselves in the clothes of value-free science while attacking (other) scholars as being ideologically biased. Value-free science hence becomes a vehicle to promote specific political values that are simultaneously downplayed and to capture knowledge-production institutions for right-wing ideological purposes.

These observations shed new light on academic freedom, both as an academic concept and a mantra that can be invoked in public debate. In line with recent scholarship on anti-intellectualism (Fassin, 2024), we should indeed understand these attacks as assaults on critical knowledge and as attempts to shut down specific fields of inquiry. However, we should also take more seriously conservative investment in higher education and recognise it as part of broader struggles for cultural hegemony. What we face is neither a debate among open-minded scholars nor an attack on education as a whole but a selective endorsement of certain fields and disciplines and an attempt at reorganising universities as institutions in a wider context of de-democratisation (Paternotte & Verloo, 2021).

The recent controversy around the hiring of Nathan Cofnas, an outspoken detractor of wokeism, as postdoctoral researcher by the Universiteit Gent illustrates these different points. As soon as this was known, numerous colleagues from this university and beyond started to express their discomfort, since Cofnas is a controversial philosopher known for his rehabilitation of research in racial difference.[14] This debate exposes the limits of academic freedom, an argument mostly used to defend Cofnas' hiring, as shown in philosopher Maarten Boudry's public statements.[15] It also confirms the limits of university governance instruments as, from what we know, this researcher had the required academic credentials and was hired following the rules of the university. The problem raised by many colleagues lies elsewhere and references to antidiscrimination law do not suffice. What is missing, and that we need to invent, is a tool to face ideological attacks from within the university.

This short piece should therefore be read as a plea for a more complex understanding of the current situation and the invention of a broader repertoire of responses. Academic freedom remains a vital resource and deserves robust protection, but it does not respond to all the problems we face. Defending academic freedom should not entail retreating into an ivory-tower narrative and this debate needs to be reframed from whether science is obstructed to how it interacts with concrete political projects. We should also pay more attention to

[14] https://www.standaard.be/opinies/45-filosofen-roepen-op-om-nathan-cofnas-te-weren-van-de-ugent-wat-hij-verkondigt-is-pseudowetenschap-en-racisme/140195248.html, https://www.standaard.be/opinies/behalve-wat-obsceen-geroep-hebben-nathan-cofnas-en-zijn-trawanten-ons-niets-te-bieden/143617428.html, https://www.demorgen.be/meningen/het-pseudowetenschappelijk-discours-van-cofnas-vervuilt-goed-genetisch-onderzoek-in-plaats-van-het-te-bevorderen~b1cd26e5/, https://www.demorgen.be/meningen/er-zijn-grenzen-aan-tolerantie-voor-extremistische-stellingnamen-in-een-open-maatschappij~b1b78376/

[15] https://doorbraak.be/maarten-boudry-over-de-ugent-uiterst-linkse-activisten-kan-je-niet-paaien

internal attacks, where opponents are fellow academics who can wear different hats and work closely with non-academic actors. Finally, this analysis should not be read, as many right-wing analysts would probably do, as an attempt to build or consolidate universities as leftist bastions, but as insisting on the importance of democratic values to knowledge production. Embracing this complexity would better equip scholars to respond more effectively to contemporary assaults on science and to avoid the traps deliberately set by right-wing political strategies.

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